タクティカル ジャッジメント 6
Tactical Judgment
湯けむりのデスティニー！ 大舌戦編
Toru Shiwasu
師走トオル
FUJIMI MYSTERY BUNKO

Tactical Judgment

「なんでてめぇがここにいる？」
法廷にいたのは、
できれば二度と見たくない顔だった。

氏神の第二声は恨みがましいものだった。
「ふざけんじゃねぇ。伊織のやつ、
新幹線の時刻表用意して待ってたぞ!?」
俺はマリアのような氏神の細君を思った。

Tactical Judgment Vol 6: Steamy Destiny! (Debate)

By Toru Shiwasu

Translated by waifutime

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guest

氏神功徳
監察医。かつて山鹿、影野とともにホストリオと……。

東ケ崎英雄
検察官。ハイエナ。（山鹿談）

一ノ宮昌子
資産家の老女。首を吊った遺体となって発見され、その殺人容疑が彼の義理の息子である二岡浩二にかけられるが、その後裁判で自殺であると判断される。

一ノ宮明之
一ノ宮昌子の再婚相手。二岡夫妻とは血の繋がりはない。海水魚を飼うことが趣味で、ぜん息の持病を持っている。

五十嵐浩太郎
山鹿たちが宿泊している旅館うたかたの主人。

二岡浩二
前回、一ノ宮昌子を殺害したとされ、逮捕されたが、山鹿の弁護によって無罪となる。

二岡真由
二岡浩二の妻で、一ノ宮昌子の一人娘。

一ノ宮智康
一ノ宮明之の弟。

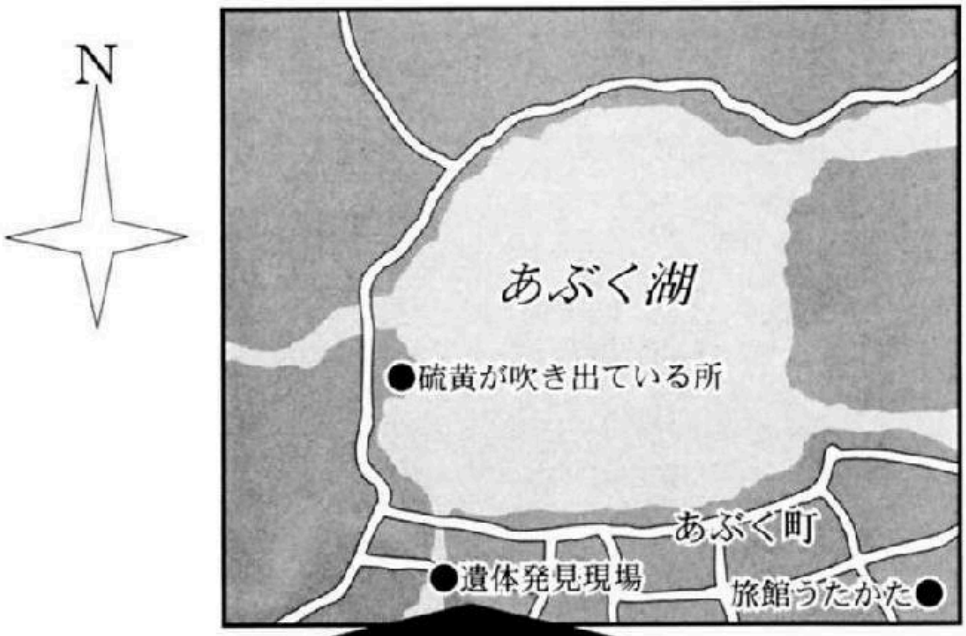
葛西昭三
一ノ宮昌子の主治医。

木下卓巡査
あぶく町の駐在員。

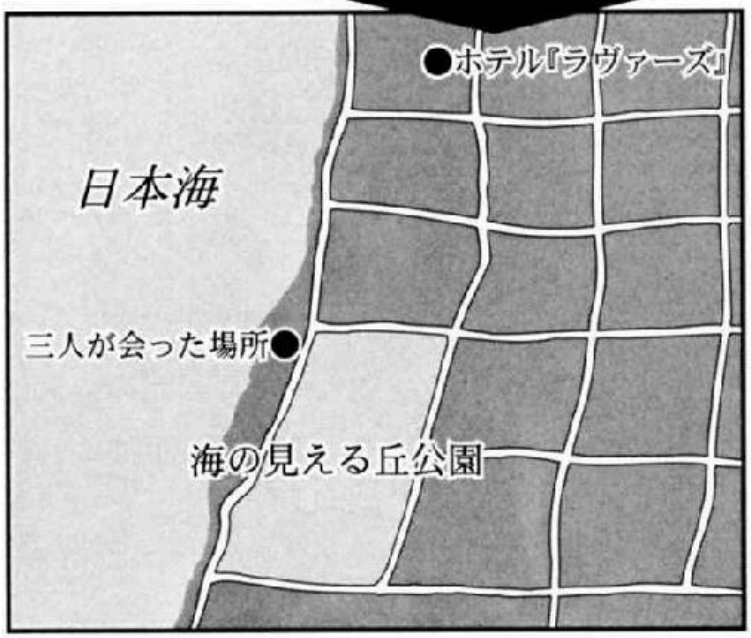
池上良
裁判長。

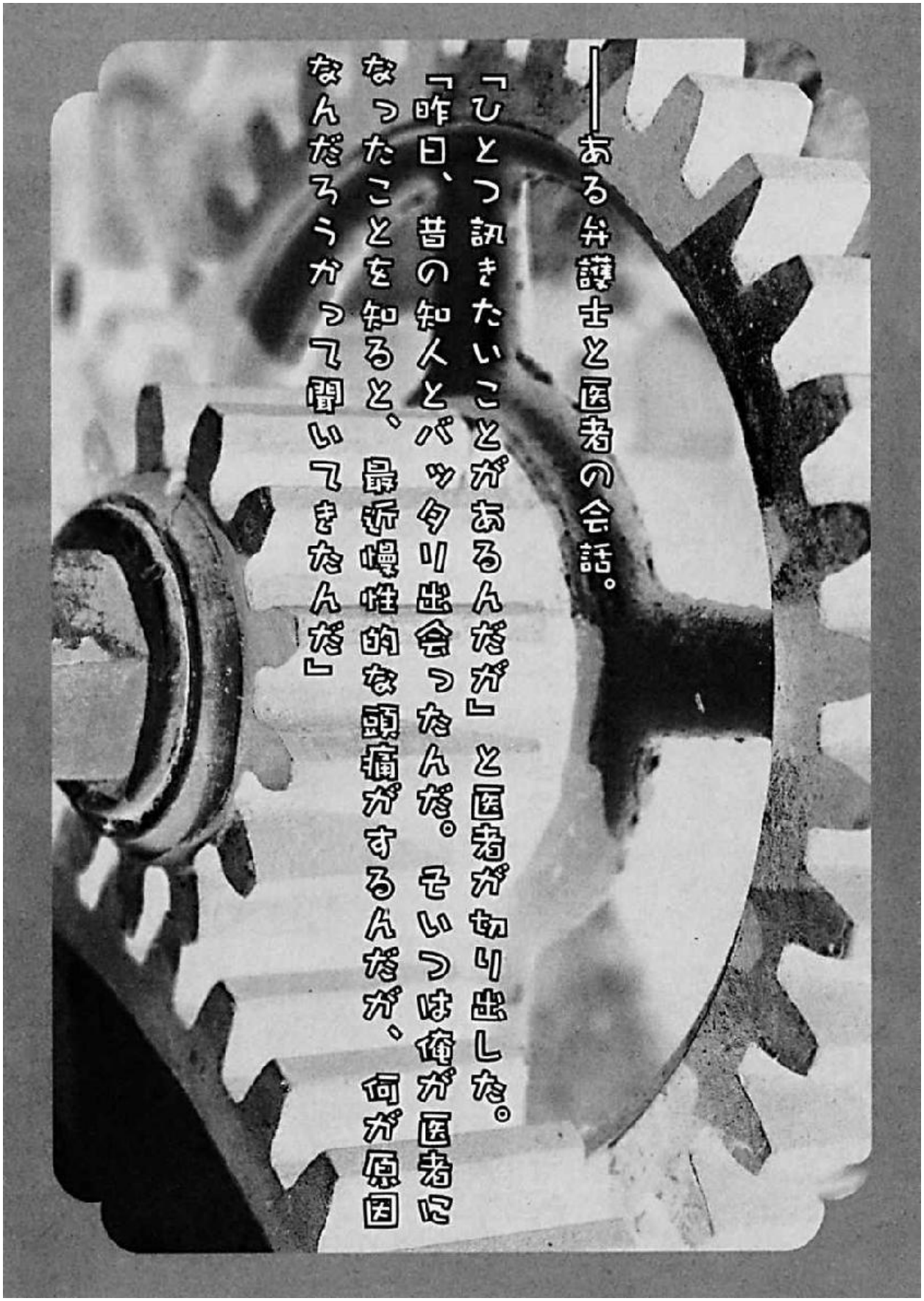
本庄巌
検察の要請で司法解剖を行う法医学者。

あぶく町周辺MAP



車で約一時間の距離

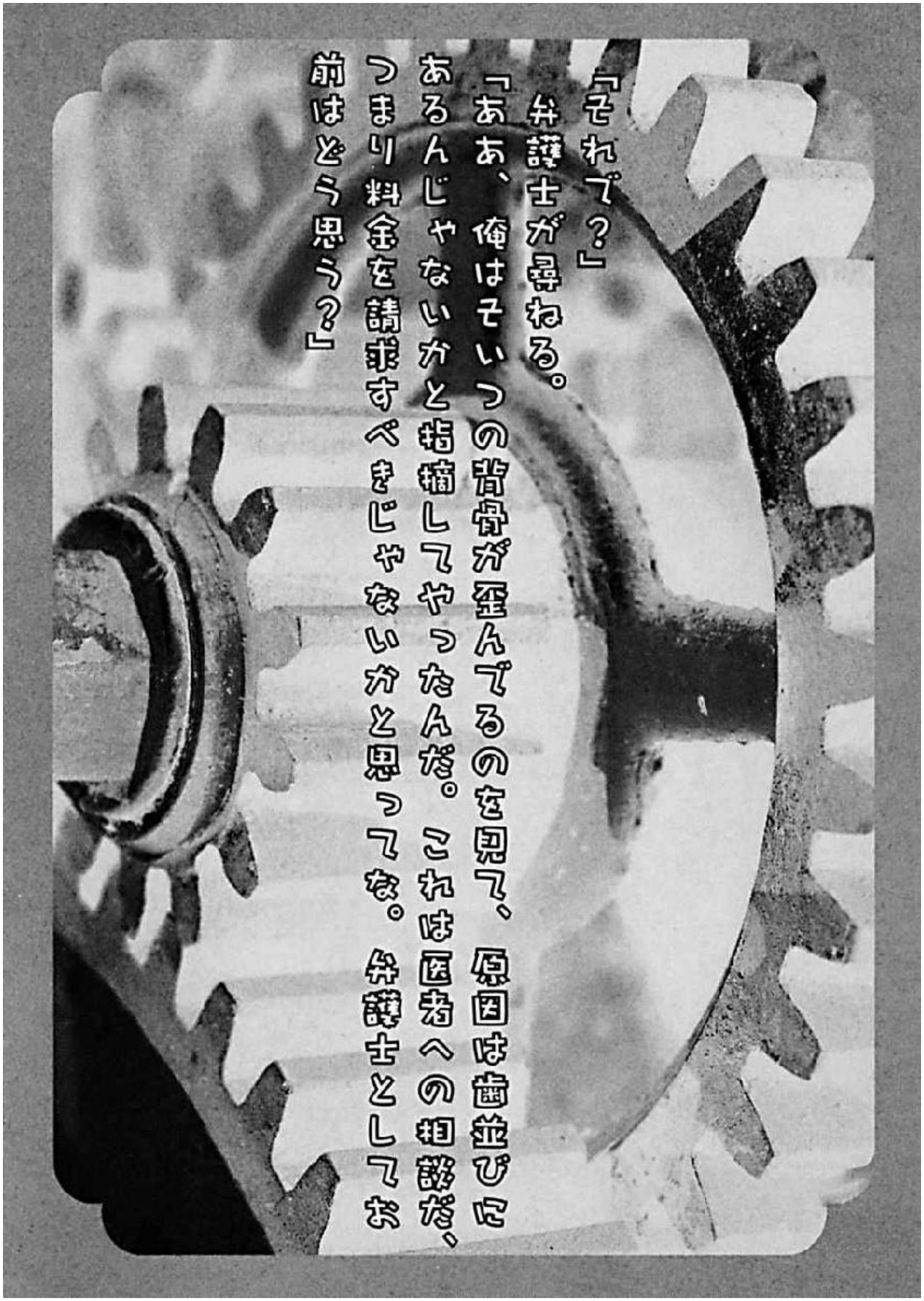


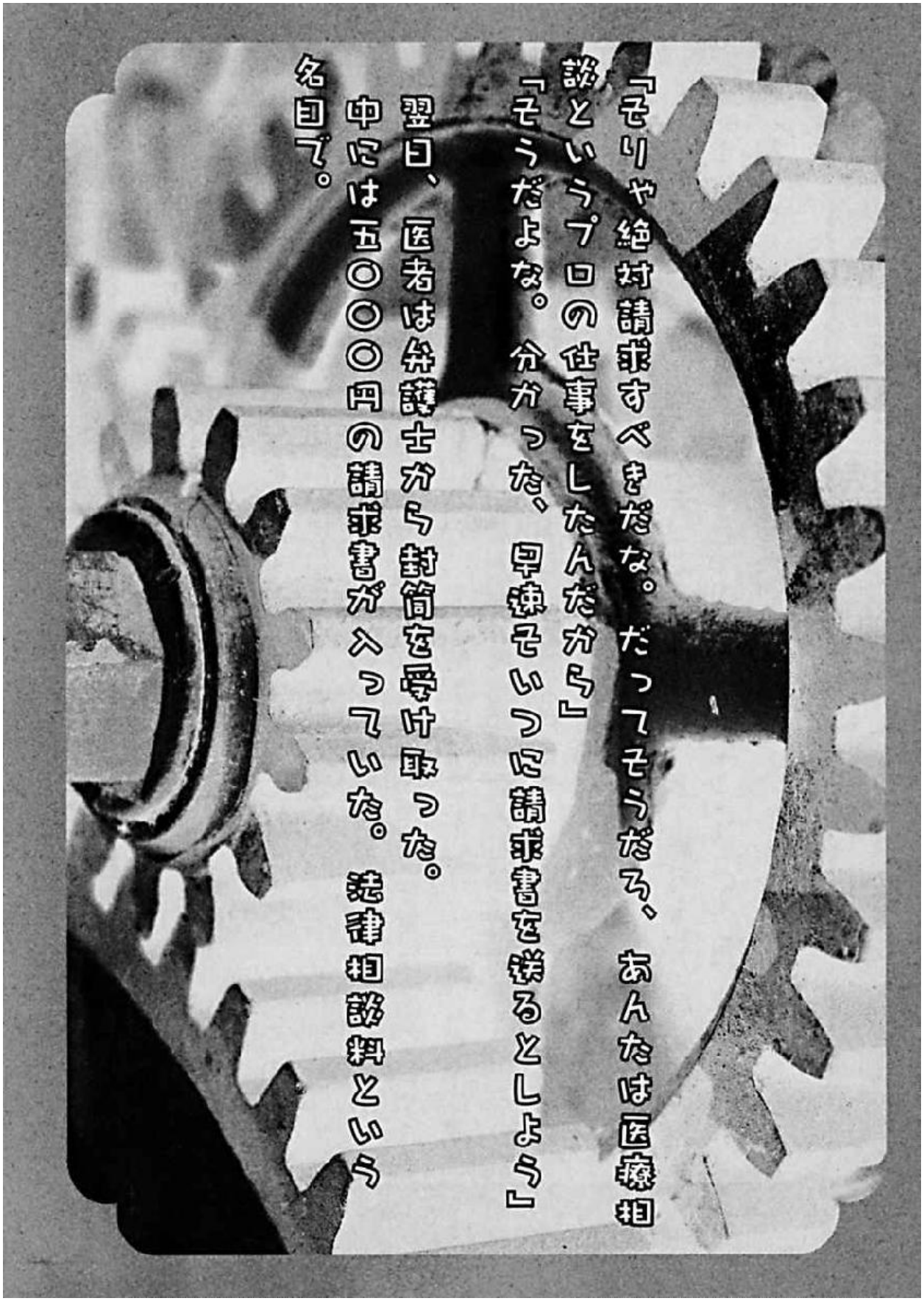


―ある弁護士と医者の会話。

「ひとつ訊きたいことがあるんだが」と医者が切り出した。

「昨日、昔の知人とバッタリ出会ったんだ。そいつは俺が医者になったことを知ると、最近慢性的な頭痛がするんだが、何が原因なんだろうかって聞いてきたんだ」


「それで？」
弁護士が尋ねる。
「ああ、俺はそいつの背骨が歪んでるのを見て、原因は歯並びにあるんじゃないかと指摘してやったんだ。これは医者への相談だ、つまり料金を請求すべきじゃないかと思ってな。弁護士としてお前はどう思う？」



「そりゃ絶対請求すべきだな。だってそうだろ、あんたは医療相談というプロの仕事をしたんだから」

「そうだよな。分かった、早速そいつに請求書を送るとしよう」

翌日、医者は弁護士から封筒を受け取った。中には五〇〇〇円の請求書が入っていた。法律相談料という名目で。

—A conversation between a lawyer and a doctor.

"I have something I want to ask," the doctor began.

"Yesterday, I ran into an old acquaintance. When he found out I'd become a doctor, he mentioned he's been dealing with chronic headaches lately and asked what might be causing them."

"And then?" the lawyer asked.

"Well, I noticed his spine was misaligned and suggested that the cause might be his teeth alignment. Since he was asking me for medical advice, I thought maybe I should charge him a consultation fee. What do you think, as a lawyer?"

"Absolutely, you should charge him," the lawyer replied. "After all, you provided a professional medical consultation."

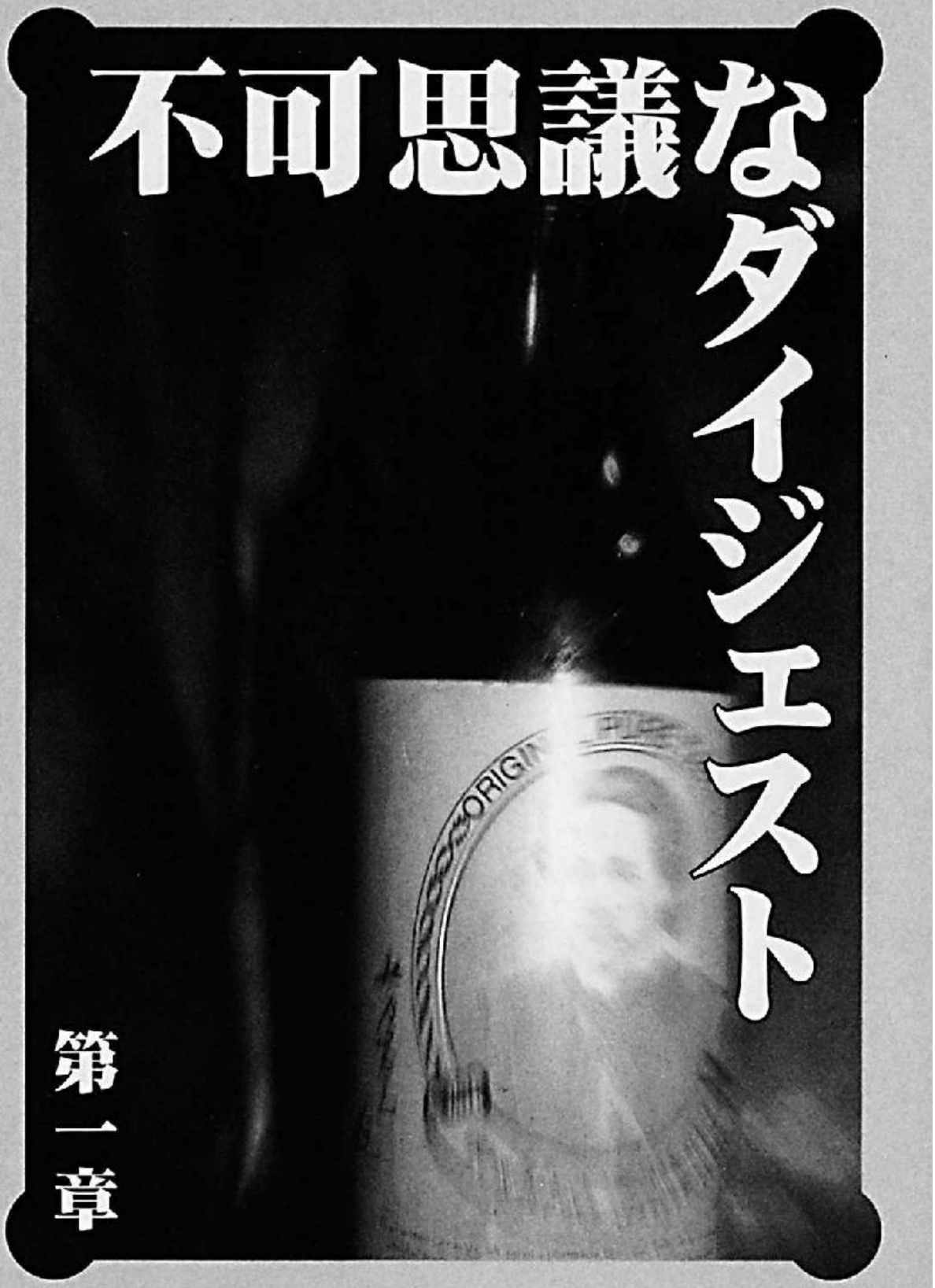
"You're right. Okay, I'll send him an invoice right away."

The next day, the doctor received an envelope from the lawyer.

Inside was an invoice for 30 dollars — labeled as a legal consultation fee.

前回のあらすじ
よーするにね、類まれなる幸運を持つあたしが福引で一泊二日の温泉旅行を引き当てて、みんなでいくことになったわけ。
で、そこでなんか善行の若の知り合いが出てきたんだけど、例によってまた死体まで出てきちゃって、これまた例のごとくとこぞのでしゃばり弁護士がしゃしゃり出ていって、容疑者をてきとーに弁護して例によってまたなんか無茶な論法で無罪を勝ち取ったらしいの。
で。一件落着かと思って弁護士が事務所に帰ってきたところに、また電話。つい半日前に無罪にしてあげた元依頼人が、今度は別の人の殺人容疑で捕まっちゃったんだって。
ほんっとに運の悪い人もいたもんだけど、まー善行みたいな死神弁護士と付き合いをもっちゃったのが運のツキってことよね。さーて、今回はどんな方法で無罪にするんだか……。

不可思議なダイジェスト



第一章

Chapter 1: Unfathomable Digest

December 11th, 11:15 AM, Detention Center

When one thinks of a meeting in a detention center, the first thing that comes to mind is likely a visiting room separated by a transparent plastic barrier.

However, in this case, both suspects involved in the incident became my clients simultaneously. Perhaps to make the meeting easier, or maybe to avoid being accused of "obstructing the defense by forcing the meeting to take place in a room where conversation is impossible," the room they led me to was just a normal room, without any plastic walls.

The window was small, and the room was dim, giving it an oppressive atmosphere that I didn't like, but it had a large table and three chairs, which was more than enough for a conversation with my two clients.

Three chairs. Naturally, I sat in one, and the couple sat in the other two.

The husband's name was Koji Nioka. There was nothing particularly striking about his physical appearance, but the most memorable feature was his villainous face, with narrow eyes and a mouth turned down at the corners. On top of that, he was currently unemployed, and to add to it, until just yesterday, he had been the defendant in another murder case.

The wife's name was Mayu Nioka. In contrast to her somewhat incompetent-looking husband, she was a beautiful woman who fit the description of a capable career woman. However, given that she was currently a suspect in a murder case, she seemed completely despondent. In that regard, her husband seemed less disturbed by the situation, perhaps because it was the second time we were meeting in a detention center.

"Alright, can you walk me through what happened after yesterday's trial?"

When I opened the conversation, the husband was the first to speak.

"Yes. As you know, I was released around 3 PM yesterday.

After that, I thought I'd go for a drive with my wife... but suddenly, I got a call on my cell phone."

"From who?"

"My father-in-law."

"Your father-in-law? You mean Akiyuki Ichinomiya, who was found dead last night?"

"Yes, that's right."

Akiyuki Ichinomiya. He was the remarried husband of Mayu Nioka’s mother.

"What did he want?"

"He said there was something he really needed to talk about and asked if we could meet right away..."

"So, you went to meet him?"

Koji Nioka nodded.

False charges can often arise from the most unexpected circumstances. If he hadn't gone to meet him, perhaps we wouldn't be meeting again like this — I had a vague feeling about that.

"Where did you meet?"

"By the seaside. It’s about a ten-minute drive from the courthouse."

"The seaside? Why there?"

"That place held special memories for him... my father-in-law loved the sea, and apparently, the place where he proposed to my mother-in-law was by that seaside."

"I see. And what did you talk about?"

"Well, my father-in-law was deeply regretful about driving my mother-in-law to suicide. Over the past few months, my mother-in-law’s health deteriorated rapidly, to the point where she couldn’t even go out easily anymore. Life lost its meaning for him, and he ended up burying himself in his hobbies, which he regretted had driven her to such extremes. He even had a bit to drink."

"He was drinking?"

Well, it was understandable. After all, he had just realized that his actions had driven his wife to suicide. It was no wonder he’d be drinking even in broad daylight.

"And then?"

"He told us to live happily ever after as a couple. He said he might not have much to leave us, but to forgive him. That’s what he said."

"…I see."

It was a strange conversation. The content of it sounded almost like—

"It almost sounds like he was saying, 'I'm going to follow my wife and commit suicide, so take care of things after I'm gone.'"

"Yes, I thought so too," Mayu Nioka said. "So I hurriedly tried to convince him that my mother's suicide wasn't his fault."

"I see. And then?"

"Well, he eventually smiled and assured us that he wasn't going to commit suicide. So, we were somewhat relieved and soon after, we parted ways."

"What time did you part?"

"I think it was around 4 PM."

"I see. And then?"

When I prompted him to continue, Koji Nioka hesitated to speak, scratching his nose with a slight grin. For some reason, his wife blushed and looked down.

"Well, after that, we... uh... went to relax a bit..."

"..."

A man and a woman alone together, relaxing. And their reactions...

"Don't tell me you went somewhere so deserted that you couldn't even establish an alibi?"

"Uh, yes, something like that."

"…A hotel?"

"Yes, well..."

For a moment, I felt a surge of anger.

Yesterday, at 4 PM, while I was struggling to drive back home after finishing this villain's trial, these two were out there enjoying their freedom, doing something that Yukina and I wouldn't be able to do for a while!

…No, wait, calm down. If I was jealous that they went to a hotel, it meant I was losing as a man.

I somehow managed to regain my composure and asked the next question.

"...How long were you relaxing?"

"Uh, from 4 PM to 7 PM, so three hours."

Three hours!

While I was struggling behind the wheel, these two were in a hotel for three hours straight! Yeah, I bet, after going through a stressful trial, they must've had a lot of pent-up energy. And of course, I was talking about stress.

Right after being acquitted, heading to a hotel... they must've had quite the release!

…No, no. I couldn't let myself get carried away. I almost seriously considered going home right now.

But that wouldn't be fitting of a lawyer, and more importantly, it would just be pathetic. Lately, it felt like my thoughts were going in strange directions. Maybe I was the one who was the most pent-up right now? And of course, I was talking about stress.

"Well, alright. Then what happened?"

"Yes. After that, we thought we'd grab something to eat and head home, but suddenly, I got a call from the police. That's when we first heard that my father-in-law had been found dead..."

"And then they asked you to come to the police station?"

"Yes, that's right. They said they had a few questions they wanted to ask us. Like when was the last time we saw my father-in-law. At first, it didn't seem like they were treating us as suspects at all. But as we kept answering their questions, at some point, the detective's demeanor changed, and eventually, they issued an arrest warrant..."

"I see. I've got a rough idea of what happened. But there are still a lot of things that don't make sense.

You told the police about the conversation you had with Akiyuki Ichinomiya by the seaside, right?"

"Yes," Mr. Nioka replied. "The first thing they asked was when we last saw my father-in-law. We never imagined we'd be arrested, so we answered honestly..."

"But even after hearing that, the police didn't consider this case to be a suicide?"

"Well... yes, I got the impression that at first, they were considering both the possibility of suicide and murder. But after we told them about the conversation by the seaside, the detective suddenly interrupted the questioning. He said we should take a break.

But then, about an hour later, he suddenly started asking us in detail about our alibi. So, we told him about going to the hotel..."

"I see. And in the end, you got arrested and came crying to me?"

"Uh, no, actually, not exactly. At that point, we hadn't been arrested yet."

"What? But you called me last night saying you'd been arrested."

"Well... I'm sorry. The questioning suddenly got intense, and I felt like I was being treated as the culprit, so I just... When I said I wanted to contact my lawyer, the detective surprisingly agreed without any fuss."

"...I see. Well, what can you do."

If an interrogation suddenly shifted from a simple questioning of the bereaved to treating him as a prime suspect, it was no wonder he'd fall into the illusion that he had been arrested. It wasn't a problem if he contacted me early, so I'd let it slide that he lied to me.

"So, when were you formally arrested?"

"This morning. Around 9 AM..."

Well, that made sense. It would have been too hasty otherwise. ...Though, I knew some prosecutors who wouldn't hesitate to move that quickly.

Still, getting arrested overnight was fast enough. It wouldn't be an exaggeration to call it unusual. There were many things about this case that just didn't add up.

"But even if you were at a secluded hotel, didn't you have any sort of alibi? You must've at least signed the guest register, right?"

"No, there was a reception, but the setup was such that we didn't have to see anyone. And if you're just taking a break, you don't have to sign the guest register."

"...Oh, right, that's how it works, isn't it?"

Right. Sure, in a regular hotel, there were plenty of opportunities to be seen, and signing the guest register was technically required by law. But if the hotel's purpose was for couples to be

alone, it wasn't going to be designed in a way that drew attention. It had been so long since I had had any reason to use one that I'd completely forgotten.

"But there was at least a check-in and check-out process, right? If you stayed too long, they'd charge you an extension fee, wouldn't they?"

"No, even that... the system's designed so you don't have to meet anyone. But there was a security camera, so we should have been caught on that, and we told the police as much..."

Indeed. Even if it was a hotel designed to avoid human contact, it was still a place where money changed hands, so there would naturally be at least one security camera. Not that it was hard to avoid being caught on camera if you know where they were placed.

"The body was found in Abuku Town, right? How long does it take to get there by car from the hotel?"

"I think about an hour. It was just a few minutes from the seaside."

"The body was found around 6 PM, wasn't it?"

"Yes."

"The roads around Abuku Town get closed off at night, don't they?"

"No, the road closure starts at 7 PM..."

"Hmm."

If they didn't have an alibi for those three hours from 4 PM, then... After abducting Akiyuki Ichinomiya at the seaside, they could have made it look like they went to the hotel, driven for an hour to Abuku Town, drowned him by tossing him into the river, and then driven back to the hotel before the roads closed...

Unfortunately, the timing worked out. The police were probably thinking along similar lines.

But could they really have abducted the victim at the seaside, driven him around in the car for an hour, and then drowned him so easily?

...Well, these two were his children-in-law. If they coaxed him with the right words, they could get him to do anything. And I did recall the news yesterday saying that sleeping pills were found in the victim's system.

Wait a minute. Children-in-law? That's right, I'd forgotten something important. These two didn't have any direct blood relation to Akiyuki Ichinomiya. In other words—

"Hey, let me ask you something. If Akiyuki Ichinomiya was murdered, would you two stand to gain anything from it? Children-in-law don't have inheritance rights, do they?"

"N-No, it's just... actually, I was legally adopted by my father-in-law. So I do have inheritance rights," Mayu Nioka said hesitantly.

True, you often heard about people adopting their children-in-law when they get married. Not only did it give them inheritance rights, but it also helped smooth over family relationships. Akiyuki Ichinomiya seemed like a serious man, so it was a plausible story.

"Let me ask you one more thing. Does the mention of sleeping pills ring any bells?"

"Ah, yes. You know how I was in court until yesterday? The night before the trial, I was so anxious that I couldn't sleep at all. So I had Dr. Kasai prescribe me some sleeping pills."

"Dr. Kasai...? Oh, right, that attending physician."

Shozo Kasai. He was the attending physician of Shoko Ichinomiya, who died in the previous case, and was staying at the same inn as her while she was undergoing treatment. Koji Nioka, who was out on bail during the previous trial, was also staying at the same inn, so it wouldn't have been difficult for Dr. Kasai to prescribe him the sleeping pills.

"Do you still have those pills?"

"Yes. I was given a three-day supply, but I only used one day's worth."

Hmm. This, too, would undoubtedly be counted as another disadvantageous point.

The more I heard, the more suspicious these two seemed. There were certainly signs that pointed to them being the culprits.

But I was still not convinced.

Why did the police decide to abandon the suicide theory and proceed with a murder case? Sure, if we assumed that the story this couple told about the seaside was a lie, then we couldn't rule out the possibility of murder.

But why did the police decide to arrest them this morning? Koji Nioka had just been acquitted of another murder charge yesterday afternoon. And now, less than 24 hours later, the same police department arrested him again for a new murder charge? Anyone would think the police were abusing their power out of revenge.

The public was particularly sensitive to accusations of power abuse. For the police to take such a risk and arrest the Nioka couple, they must be pretty confident about this case. Maybe they had, as usual, some decisive witness or evidence...

"Um, so, will you take our case, sir?"

As I was pondering this, the wife asked the obligatory question, her eyes trembling with anxiety.

"I need you both to answer this question before I can decide.

Koji, we went through this in your previous case, but it's the first time for your wife, isn't it?"

"Y-Yes, what is it?"

"Listen, I'm a lawyer. There's something called attorney-client privilege. What that means is that conversations between a lawyer and their client are protected, and no one — not even the police or the court — can pry into them. In other words, no matter what you say here, I absolutely won't reveal it to anyone.

Now, keep that in mind, and let me ask you one question.

Answer me honestly: were either of you, directly or indirectly, involved in Akiyuki Ichinomiya's death?"

Mayu Nioka looked at her husband anxiously.

He gave her a firm nod, then looked me straight in the eye and answered.

"No. I swear, we had nothing to do with my father-in-law's death. We were at the hotel the entire time."

"Just as my husband said. Besides, we had no reason to kill him in the first place..."

"Alright. That's enough for now. I'll do everything I can."

"Oh, thank you so much!"

Mayu Nioka bowed deeply, overwhelmed with gratitude.

Were these two suspects really unrelated to the incident? To be honest, I couldn't definitively say yes at this stage.

However, there had been very few cases where I was completely convinced of a client's innocence before taking on their defense. In the end, I'd just have to trust what they said.

Besides, there was one more reason why I had to defend these two.

Koji Nioka had just been acquitted yesterday of the murder charge concerning Shoko Ichinomiya, thanks to my defense. If he were to be found guilty of this new murder charge, it would undoubtedly reignite suspicions about the previous murder charge as well.

If that were to happen, it would be a disaster. There was no doubt that I would become the scapegoat, branded as the unscrupulous lawyer who used aggressive tactics to get a murderer acquitted. I marketed myself as a righteous lawyer who saved those falsely accused of crimes, so I definitely wanted to avoid such a situation at all costs.

However, the more I thought about it, the more bizarre this case seemed.

Normally, no one would think that someone who was just acquitted of murder would commit another murder on the same day. While it was possible that this was a reverse psychology move to make it seem that way, even if that was the case, arresting someone who was just acquitted within 24 hours for a different crime seemed utterly absurd.

This situation should have been handled with more caution. After all, being acquitted in a criminal trial essentially nullified all the efforts of the police and prosecution. Arresting Koji Nioka the very next morning on a different charge — it just looked like the authorities were lashing out in frustration. Even if they had solid evidence and were convinced that the Nioka couple were the culprits, they would normally wait a day or two to avoid public outcry. But the prosecution didn't do that.

The only local prosecutor I knew of was Taki, the prosecutor I had dealt with just yesterday. But as much as I hated to say it, I didn't think Taki had the guts to make such a bold move. A prosecutor who could do something so audacious without hesitation...

...At that moment, a chill ran down my spine, making me shiver. No, it couldn’t be...

◆

"Hey, you lousy detective. Wake up, it's time to go."

When I left the holding cell and got back to the car, I punched the so-called detective who was snoring away in the backseat, hitting him in the solar plexus to wake him up.

"Ugh... Damn it, couldn’t you wake me up in a more reasonable way?"

"This way wakes you up faster. We're heading out."

"Back to the inn? Good, my joints ache too much to sleep in the car."

"Is sleeping all you ever think about? We're not going back to the inn yet. First, we're doing a crime scene investigation."

Kageno stared at me as if he were looking at some kind of rare animal.

"A crime scene investigation? It's unusual for someone like you, a cushy lawyer, to suggest something like that."

"I'll do whatever's necessary. It seems time and place are going to play a big role this time around."

As I started the car, I shared the information I'd just gathered at the holding cell with Kageno.

"I see. So, as usual, the prosecution has some dirt on us that we don't know about."

"That's right. The body was found at Abuku Lake. It's about an hour's drive from here. I still have no clue why the Nioka couple, who were supposedly far away, were linked to this case."

"Kageno, just to be sure, do you have any connections with the local police around here?"

"None. If I ask around with local detectives, maybe I could get something... But remember, it was just yesterday that you embarrassed the local police, right? And by now, they probably know you're defending the Nioka couple in this case too. To be honest, you should assume there's zero chance of getting the information you're looking for."

He had a point.

It was just yesterday that I managed to save Koji Nioka from the clutches of the prosecution. The fact that they arrested him again within 24 hours could be seen as a challenge to me. They were hardly likely to share any valuable information with someone like me.

As we continued our conversation, our destination came into view.

"Oh, the sea."

Kageno made a curious remark as the vast, unfamiliar landscape unfolded outside the window.

The sea. In my hometown, you could see it if you drove for an hour, but it wasn't something you saw every day. When you saw such a grand sight again, it gave you an indescribable sense of freedom. The only thing I was dissatisfied with was that I had to view this beautiful scenery with another guy.

The beach where my two clients supposedly had a meaningful conversation with the now-deceased Akiyuki Ichinomiya was adjacent to a place called "Seaside Hill Park." The park was separated from the road by just a strip of land, and beyond that was the beach. Well, it was more accurate to call it a shore than a beach.

The park seemed well-maintained, likely because it was close to the city. But since it was December, and we were in the Tohoku region facing the Sea of Japan, there was, of course, no one swimming. Even if it were summer, it didn't seem like a place where people would come for a beach day. It was probably more of a spot for watching the sunset.

"So, this is where your clients last met with the victim?"

Kageno rolled down the car window and surveyed the surroundings.

A cold wind blew in from the Sea of Japan.

"Yeah. That was around 4 PM yesterday."

Kageno checked his watch.

"So, that was about 22 hours ago. It's 2 PM now, and it's this cold. There couldn't have been anyone around."

Just as Kageno said, the well-maintained park, which wasn't exactly small, was almost completely devoid of people.

Normally, I would be hoping that no one saw the victim with my clients, but this time, the couple had already admitted to meeting with the victim at this place. If there were a witness who saw that scene, it might actually help us find some kind of lead...

The next place we headed to — was somewhere a bit embarrassing to say out loud.

It looked like a castle, and if an innocent child saw it, they might want to stay there, not realizing its true purpose, causing their parents some distress. Let's just say it was a fairy tale-like hotel.

Oh, and the hotel had the rather straightforward name of "Lovers."

"So, this is the next place that couple visited?"

"Yeah."

I checked my watch. It hadn't even taken five minutes to get here from the beach.

Now, here's where the problem lied.

The Nioka couple visited this place around 4 PM yesterday. They reportedly stayed here for about three hours to "rest." The main issue was that they had no alibi for this time.

"I'll just say this, Yamashika."

Kageno suddenly spoke.

"...What?"

"No matter how much it's for the investigation, I'm not going in there with you."

"Obviously. I don't want to go in there either. You go check it out by yourself later."

"Yeah, I'll do that."

Surprisingly, Kageno agreed without a fuss.

I absolutely didn't want to go into such a hotel with another man, but even going in alone was a bit uncomfortable. I figured Kageno would put up a fight, even though it was my order for the sake of the investigation...

Well, when it came to detective work, I had heard it was mostly cheating investigations, first and foremost. Maybe investigating a hotel didn't bother him too much.

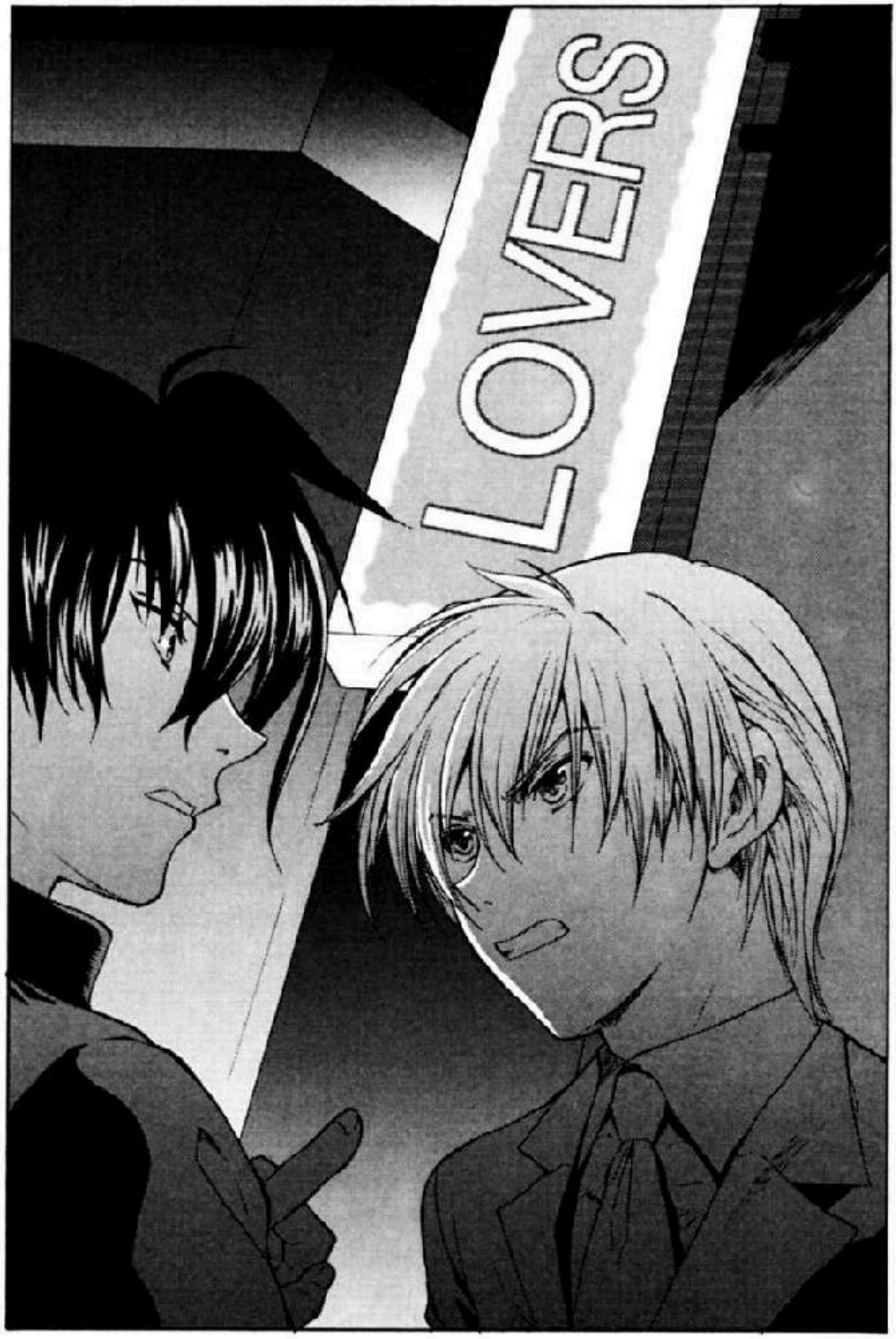
"Alright, next we're heading to where the body was found."

"Yeah, yeah."

Abuku Town. The name was so odd it made you question the sense of whoever named it. The town was located in the southeastern part of a large lake in the mountains. The lake was called Abuku Lake, named for the bubbles of hot springs that rose from its bottom.

The population was about 2,000. It was a famous hot spring town, and it was where I had been staying until just yesterday.

The body of Akiyuki Ichinomiya, the victim in this case, was found in one of the rivers flowing out of Abuku Lake. Geographically, it was located to the west of the hot spring town, southwest of Abuku Lake. I wasn't familiar with the area. I was a bit worried about whether I could find the crime scene, but thankfully, because the incident had just occurred yesterday, a small crowd of tourists had gathered at the scene, so my worry was unfounded.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This was a place where people were unlikely to pass by unless something like this incident happened. There were streetlights around, but the nearest houses were a little way off.

The bridge was about ten meters long and made of concrete. A dirty white guardrail served as the railing, giving it a modern look devoid of any charm. The river that flowed beneath it was about five meters wide. The water was clear enough to see the bottom, but it wasn't the kind of river that made you want to take a dip. The depth probably wasn't even a meter.

A few onlookers were hanging around, peering down at the river from the bridge. As is often the case at the site where a body is found, flowers, snacks, and canned juice had been left at the corner of the bridge. It was a trivial thought, but I wondered how these kinds of offerings were disposed of.

After parking the car by the side of the road, the smell of sulfur hit my nose as soon as I opened the door. Well, it wasn't surprising since there were hot springs bubbling up nearby.

"Was the body found lying on this bridge?"

As we reached the bridge, Kageno asked.

"You call yourself a detective, but you didn't even read the newspaper? It wasn't on the bridge, it was below. The body was caught on one of the bridge's pillars."

"You dragged me out so early this morning that I didn't have time to read it."

Kageno made an excuse as he leaned over the bridge to look down.

"I guess the body floated downstream and got caught there."

There was no disagreement with that assumption. Following the river upstream with my eyes, I could see another similar bridge. Beyond that, Abuku Lake was visible. It was entirely possible that the body had been dumped from the upstream bridge or somewhere in the lake and then floated down to this point.

"By the way, how long did it take to get here from the hotel?"

"Oh, I almost forgot."

I hastily checked my watch. It was just past 3:20 PM. Considering it took us a few minutes to find this place, someone familiar with the area could probably get here in under an hour.

Koji Nioka and Akiyuki Ichinomiya, the victim, parted ways at the beach around 4 PM yesterday. It took less than five minutes to get from the beach to the hotel. And it took roughly an hour to get here from the hotel.

According to what I heard, the couple was at the hotel from 4 PM to 7 PM. However, the round trip from the hotel to this crime scene would take only about two hours. Plus, there was currently no alibi to prove they were at the hotel. In other words, the couple had plenty of time to kill the victim.

But even so, why did the police connect the Nioka couple, who were at a location an hour away by car, to the murder of a victim found floating in this river? Of course, there must be some evidence I wasn't aware of, but I would have thought the first suspects would be acquaintances of the victim staying in Abuku Town...

December 11th, 3:55 PM, Utakata Inn

"Welcome, Mr. Yamashika. We've been expecting you."

Kotaro Igarashi, the proprietor of this inn, greeted us with rubbing hands as we entered.

"Yeah, sorry for the trouble."

"Please, stay as long as you need. Take good care of Mr. and Mrs. Nioka. We've prepared the same room as the other day, please come this way."

He was a middle-aged man with a kind face, though his hair had receded halfway up his head. I wouldn't say it to his face, but I called him "Barcode Igarashi" behind his back.

Utakata Inn. This inn, which seemed like it might disappear by morning, was one of the hot spring accommodations in Abuku Town. It was only a few minutes by car from where the body was found.

Barcode Igarashi, the innkeeper, had a deep connection with the Nioka couple, who had become my clients. Until just yesterday, there was another trial involving Koji Nioka, but since Kageno and I were his defense team, we were allowed to stay at this inn for free. And now, once again, we were relying on that connection to keep our accommodation costs low during the trial.

However, the courthouse was about 45 minutes away by car. If the trial started again, we'd have to commute back and forth every day, which would be a bit of a hassle. We could stay at a place closer to the courthouse, but the best we could do there was a business hotel. On the other hand, this inn offered free lodging, and though I wasn't particularly interested, it had a hot spring. The food was good, and they even did laundry for us. No complaints here.

If there was one problem... it's that I had to stay here with another guy.

◆

When we were shown to our room, the first thing we did was change into yukata.

I didn’t bring any loungewear since I didn’t plan on enjoying the hot springs, but it was my family motto to utilize whatever was available to reduce the amount of luggage.

"Alright then... Kageno—"

"Yeah. First, the hot spring."

"Wait."

I stopped him in a hurry, surprised by his unexpected response.

"You can go to the hot spring anytime. We should have a strategy meeting first."

"In my opinion, a strategy meeting can happen anytime. Don’t you think it’s better to refresh your body and mind with a soak in the hot spring first?"

He was still the same lazy guy who loved to make excuses. But I knew how to kick him into action in situations like this.

"Who’s your employer? Don’t you care if you lose your job and can’t eat?"

"Hmph, that trick won’t work this time. Don’t think you can fire me now that we’re here. It’d be tough to hire a cheap detective willing to work in a place like this on short notice."

"Damn..."

"That’s right. See you later."

Waving a towel, he left the room.

Damn that lousy detective. If he would just follow my orders quietly, we’d get along fine, but he always got clever at times like this. If he had that much energy, he should put it into his work.

I wasn't particularly fond of baths, so I had no desire to follow Kageno to the hot spring.

Nothing much I could do though. Since things had turned out this way, I’d spend the time while Kageno was gone organizing my thoughts on this case. Especially this time, I couldn’t deny the possibility that this case was connected to the trial that just ended yesterday. I needed to go back and review the case from the beginning.

The trial of Koji Nioka that took place until yesterday.

That trial concerned the murder charge of Shoko Ichinomiya, wife of Akiyuki Ichinomiya, who was found dead in this case.

Shoko Ichinomiya. She had lost her parents in the Pacific War and seemed to have gone through quite a bit of hardship in her youth. She married her first husband at 37 and gave birth to a daughter, Mayu Nioka, at 40. She continued working diligently and accumulated a considerable amount of wealth. When her first husband passed away, she donated a portion of that wealth to welfare facilities. Although she still had enough to live comfortably, she wasn't exactly rich. Whether due to age or the strain she endured in her youth, she had been ill for the past few months and had come to this Utakata Inn for therapeutic bathing.

But four days ago — on the night of December 7 — she was found dead, hanging by the neck.

At first, the police, based on the results of the autopsy, believed she had been murdered and staged to look like a suicide, and they began an investigation. Koji Nioka, her son-in-law who was staying at the same inn on the day of the incident, was arrested as the suspect.

And then, as bad luck would have it, I ended up taking on Koji's defense. As usual, the trial began, and I established the following points:

Shoko Ichinomiya was 72 years old and had been in poor health for the past six months, both physically and mentally.

Shoko Ichinomiya died on her birthday.

However, despite being surrounded by her husband, her daughter and son-in-law, and other relatives, not a single person remembered her birthday.

And lastly, the prosecution's autopsy was flawed due to an oversight by some delinquent doctor who conducted the initial examination while drunk.

Based on these points, I speculated on who the real culprit might be in the murder of Shoko Ichinomiya.

The culprit was herself — in other words, this had not been a murder but a suicide.

The prosecution was unable to provide any reasoning, evidence, or witnesses that could overturn the facts I had established, resulting in them withdrawing the charges. In other words, Koji Nioka was acquitted.

Now, in the previous trial, several witnesses were called. Among them, of course, were people who had close relationships with Shoko Ichinomiya.

One of them was her husband, Akiyuki Ichinomiya, the victim in the current case. He was 73 years old.

These two elderly people got married only about six years ago. To be precise, it was a remarriage. Both of them had previous spouses, but they had passed away. They met at a senior citizen gathering afterward and, being alone, they found they got along well, so they decided to get married.

Akiyuki Ichinomiya. Until he retired, he worked diligently as a salaryman. Unlike his wife, who was in poor health, he was in relatively good health for his age until he was found dead last night. However, he did suffer from asthma and would sometimes cough.

From what Kageno investigated, there was nothing particularly unusual or eye-catching about his history. I thought he had remarried Shoko Ichinomiya purely for her wealth, but it turned out he never had any debts or engaged in gambling, so that possibility was nearly zero.

However, for the past few months, perhaps because his wife Shoko had been bedridden and unable to go out much, he often neglected her and became absorbed in his hobby of raising fish. I argued in court that this might have been one of the causes of Shoko Ichinomiya's suicide.

Come to think of it, when the Nioka couple met Akiyuki Ichinomiya by the sea, they said he regretted driving his wife to suicide and even hinted at his own suicide. So maybe, just maybe, I had a little something to do with it.

...Let's forget about it.

By the way, though I didn’t quite understand it, Akiyuki Ichinomiya apparently loved the sea, and many of the fish he kept were sea creatures. He even rented a room at this inn to set up his fish tanks. He did seem to have spent some of his wife’s wealth on this, but since I couldn’t tell the difference between tropical and freshwater fish, and the only sea fish I knew was Nemo, I didn’t really get it. Wait, wasn’t Nemo a type of fish? Well, whatever.

Another noteworthy point... oh yeah, there was the life insurance.

The late Ichinomiya couple had each taken out about 200 thousand dollars in life insurance for each other. Granted, they started the insurance right after they got married, and while 200 thousand dollars might seem like a lot, it wasn't particularly strange for an elderly couple to insure each other for that amount. About ten months ago, they renewed the policy, but at that time, it seemed Shoko Ichinomiya had not yet fallen ill, so there were no issues.

However, with Akiyuki Ichinomiya’s death this time, there was no doubt that another 200 thousand dollars would be moving around. If the Ichinomiya couple was dead, all their assets would go to their only daughter, Mayu Nioka, meaning to the Nioka couple. It was certain that

the prosecution was considering this as one of the motives. And the troublesome part was that, at present, there was no way to refute this fact. To make matters worse, the husband was unemployed.

Well, that was about it for the Ichinomiya couple.

Next was... Tomoyasu Ichinomiya. He was the younger brother of Akiyuki Ichinomiya, who was murdered last night.

This guy was quite the problem child. No, considering he was the younger brother of Akiyuki Ichinomiya, he was far from childlike in age, but mentally speaking, he was still very much in the realm of a child.

He had a short temper and a weak heart. A wastrel who had been relying on his brother's money to live the high life since his youth. On top of that, it seemed he was now in debt to the tune of nearly 650 thousand dollars. Apparently, he had been conned by a woman and ended up being a joint guarantor, only to be abandoned. As a result, he ended up taking care of the ailing Shoko Ichinomiya while begging for pocket money. However, it was doubtful how much care he actually gave, considering he couldn't even remember her birthday.

In the previous trial, he was truly a worthless man, giving false testimony full of contradictions, possibly to pin the blame on Koji Nioka. I even suspected for a moment that he might have killed Shoko Ichinomiya, but as her brother-in-law, he had no right to inherit her estate. In other words, he had no motive to kill Shoko Ichinomiya, so I quickly ruled him out as a suspect.

Next was Shozo Kasai, who was Shoko Ichinomiya's attending physician. He was 52 years old.

He was one of the people who were staying at that inn when the previous incident occurred.

Originally, he was a doctor running a large hospital, but when it was discovered that he had covered up a medical mistake, his hospital went bankrupt, and he was left penniless.

Given his age and the fact that the cause of his downfall was covering up a medical mistake, it seemed even having a medical license wasn't enough for him to find another job. In the end, he relied on an old connection to get hired by Shoko Ichinomiya as her attending physician. Naturally, he was in financial trouble, but like Tomoyasu Ichinomiya, he had nothing to gain from her death, so I quickly ruled him out as a suspect as well.

Oh, and we shouldn't forget the proprietor of this inn, Barcode Igarashi, who also had some connection to Shoko Ichinomiya. Before she married Akiyuki Ichinomiya and still had considerable assets, she was the owner of this Utakata Inn. During that time, Barcode Igarashi received a great deal of help from her, and now that her daughter and son-in-law were in trouble, he was offering me free lodging. Well, I didn't think that old man had much to gain from killing the Ichinomiya couple, so he wasn't probably a suspect either.

Well, that was about it for the character introductions. Now, onto the main topic. As for how to handle the trial that was coming up...

The quickest way to defend the Nioka couple was, as always, to find another culprit.

If we assumed the Nioka couple was innocent and that the victim's death was a murder rather than a suicide or an accident, the most suspicious person at the moment was... I had no idea. There was still too little evidence to make a judgment. Well, once the trial started, new witnesses should come forward. We'd have to rethink things then.

However, there was one thing that was bothering me.

Koji Nioka, who was arrested for this case, was just acquitted of another crime yesterday. The conviction rate in Japanese criminal trials exceeded 99%. If he were to be acquitted again in this case, it would be a huge embarrassment for everyone involved in the police and prosecution. It would definitely affect their careers.

So it wouldn't be surprising if there was a detective or prosecutor who was determined to convict Koji Nioka of murder this time as some sort of strange revenge. In other words — the victim's death was actually a suicide, but in order to frame Koji Nioka as a murderer again, they forced the case to be treated as a murder — that's a plausible scenario.

... Well. There were a lot of possibilities to consider, but at this point, we didn't even know what kind of evidence the prosecution would present. Thinking about it any further was pointless.

Well, it was common in criminal trials in this country for the prosecution to provide little information, making it difficult to gather the evidence needed for a defense. In the end, I'd have to do the usual and collect information during the preliminary hearing while preparing for the counterattack.

Kageno returned about ten minutes later.

"You're late. What's a man doing taking such a long bath?"

"Unlike you, I like to stay clean. Still, it's nice to be able to investigate while staying at a hot spring inn. Hey, can I order some beer from room service?"

"Beer can wait. Work talk comes first."

"I know, I know. I can guess what you want. First, check the alibis of everyone related to the victim, right?"

"... Well, yeah."

"And then we wait and see how the prosecution moves, right? So it’s more important to rest up while we can."

What he was saying made sense, but for some reason, it really got under my skin when it came from him.

Unaware of my thoughts, Kageno hummed a little tune as he picked up the room phone,

“Front desk? I’d like some beer brought up, please.”

He was acting so nonchalantly. I couldn’t hold back any longer and finally spoke up.

“Wait, Kageno. While you’re at it, let me say this.”

“What is it?”

“Order one for me too.”

After all, the bill was going to the inn’s owner anyway.

ハイエナ
第二章

Chapter 2: Hyena

December 12th, 11:18 AM, District Courtroom Number 1

The courtroom, which would soon host a preliminary hearing, was still empty of spectators.

The only ones in the courtroom now were myself and one other person — a total of just two people.

"...Hey."

I spoke in a low voice from the defense bench.

"Yes, what is it?"

The overly arrogant man responded nonchalantly.

"Why the hell are you here?"

"Oh, come on, you know the answer to that." The man shrugged exaggeratedly. "There's only one reason for me being here, and that should be obvious. I'm here to fulfill my duties as a prosecutor."

"I thought you said your base was in Tokyo?"

"I heard about the case you defended here just the other day."

The man — Togasaki — ignored my question and continued.

"I would have loved to face you in that case as well, but unfortunately, unlike you, I'm not that free, and I have other responsibilities too.

But you certainly continue to impress. I didn't expect you to wrap things up in a single day."

"..."

No matter what words of praise came out of this guy's mouth, they always sounded like insults.

"And now, here we are with this case. The local prosecutor's office, you could say, was utterly humiliated by you. So when I offered to help them get some payback, they readily agreed. Now I'm in charge of this case — I'm sure you can imagine the rest, right?"

"Yeah, I get it."

When did bureaucrats become so willing to accept people from other territories? I thought the police and prosecution — so-called law enforcement officers — were particularly strict about that kind of thing. Or maybe it just meant that I had become the worst — no, the most troublesome person for law enforcement. If that was the case, it was actually something to be pleased about.

This man's name was Hideki — maybe Hideo? — Togasaki. Well, either way. He was a capable prosecutor. Young as he was, his career wasn't that long, but he was a fiend who had handled numerous difficult cases and thrown countless defendants into the slammer.

Now I understood why they were able to so brazenly arrest someone who had just been acquitted of a different murder charge less than 24 hours earlier. If this guy Togasaki was leading the investigation, that was something he'd definitely do. Once this guy took command of an investigation, even the usually relaxed police started moving with the speed of a horse spurred by a whip.

Was it about a month ago? I had the misfortune of facing this bastard in court once before.

Needless to say, I won in the end, but it was also true that I had a tougher time with this heartless prosecutor than ever before. He saw through every sneaky — no, clever — tactic I used, and I was outwitted in verbal battles more than once.

There was no doubt that this was a prosecutor worth ridiculing, but if possible, I'd prefer never to face him again. I wanted to win and then have him stew in frustration for life — that was my evaluation of this man Togasaki. In other words, "go away, loser."

But to be honest, I was impressed that he had come all the way from Tokyo to snatch up a case that should have been handled by the local prosecutor. Since this case involved a corpse, I think I'd start calling him by this new name from now on: Hyena. From this moment on, this bastard's nickname was "Hyena Prosecutor."

"However, I must apologize to you regarding the trial of Shoko Ichinomiya."

"...For what?"

No matter what words of apology came out of this guy's mouth — well, you get the picture.

"It's obvious. Prosecutor Taki, who faced you last time, lost his will to fight and withdrew the charges without even delivering his closing argument. Knowing you, I'm sure you were fully prepared for the closing argument. I must sincerely apologize for denying you your chance to shine."

Whenever this guy said he was sorry, it usually meant he had something up his sleeve.

Just as I expected, Togasaki curled his lips into a sly grin.

"If anything, had I been in charge of the closing argument, the jury would never have believed that nonsense about the victim's death being a suicide."

...What a pain.

"As always, you're all talk. So you think Shoko Ichinomiya didn't commit suicide but was murdered?"

"Well, who knows? I'm a man of the law, so I have to respect the court's verdict.

But I can say this much: If I had been able to deliver the closing argument, the case would have ended with a very different conclusion."

Even though he was utterly defeated by me before, why did he still act so high and mighty?

Just as my mental strength was being drained by about 30%, the person who was to preside over the trial entered the courtroom.

It was another familiar face.

Judge Ryo Ikegami. He was the judge presiding over the court until just two days ago.

As Judge Ikegami took his seat, he first let out a sigh for some reason, then turned his gaze to me.

"Mr. Yamashika, I didn't expect to see you again so soon."

"It's an honor, Your Honor. I'm delighted to once again have the opportunity to present my case under the wise and fair judgment of such an esteemed judge."

"...Why is it that everything you say sounds like it has some hidden meaning? No, of course, I'm just joking."

"Hahahahahaha."

I had never heard a joke so amusing.

But to think I'd be facing the same judge twice in a row was a bit of a surprise. If judges were in such short supply, it made me worry about Japan's future. Well, considering I'd have to re-learn a new judge's face, name, and personality every time anyway, it wasn't such a bad thing.

Besides, from the impression I got in the previous preliminary hearing, this judge seemed to lean more toward the defense.

Judge Ikegami, now officially the presiding judge, next turned his attention to Togasaki.

"Prosecutor Togasaki. I've heard quite a bit about you."

"You honor me, Your Esteemed Honor. I'll do my utmost to live up to my reputation by presenting swift and flawless evidence."

"I certainly hope you do."

Don't call him "Your Esteemed Honor." Should I start doing it too? ...No, I shouldn't. If I suddenly started calling him "Your Esteemed Honor," it'd just sound like sarcasm or mockery.

"Now then, let's get to the matter at hand.

First, regarding the date and time for the preliminary hearing... The prosecution has proposed starting tomorrow. Does the defense have any requests?"

"I have no objections on that point."

"Very well. A speedy trial is in everyone's interest, and if the defense agrees, then so it shall be.

But before that, I have one question for you. Prosecutor Togasaki?"

"Yes, what is it?"

"The defendant in this case was acquitted of another murder charge just two days ago. And now, less than 24 hours later, he's been arrested again on another murder charge.

Are you aware of what people are saying about this?"

"Yes. I believe some announcer mentioned something about the police re-arresting the suspect out of spite."

"Indeed. And on top of that, we have this extremely expedited preliminary hearing schedule. Don't you think we should take more time and proceed with caution?"

That's right, give it to him.

"With all due respect, Your Esteemed Honor.

First of all, let me say this: of course, we have no feelings of resentment or anything like that. The job entrusted to us is simply to investigate when a case occurs, find the suspect, and if we firmly believe that person committed the crime, to prosecute them as we are doing now. That is all.

We have already obtained evidence sufficient to convince us that the defendants, the Nioka couple, murdered the victim. Naturally, there is no room for any reasonable doubt.

I will repeat, we harbor no feelings of resentment. When a case occurs, we simply investigate it thoroughly, arrest the perpetrator, and bring them to trial to face justice. This trial is no different.

Given that, there should be no issue with requesting a speedy preliminary hearing for the sake of a swift resolution to this case."

As usual, his grandiose statements, backed by baseless confidence, seemed to be alive and well. In all the trials I had experienced, there had never been a single case where the prosecution could prove a murder beyond a reasonable doubt.

But still, after blowing such hot air, it would be enjoyable to see what excuses he came up with when he lost later.

"...Very well. Since the defense agrees, there's no need for me to say anything further. We will proceed with the selection of the jury immediately after this.

Now, regarding bail... Let's start by hearing the defense's opinion. You are, of course, going to request bail, correct?"

"Of course, Your Honor.

The prosecution has just confidently declared that they can convict the defendants. If that's the case, there should be no reason for them to tamper with the evidence. I will personally take responsibility for managing the two defendants. I guarantee there is absolutely no chance of them fleeing."

"Hmm. What is the prosecution's stance?"

Togasaki shrugged his shoulders exaggeratedly for no reason and said,

"I have no objections. Mr. Yamashika has handled numerous criminal defenses before. And to date, none of his clients have violated their bail conditions. I will take the defense's word for it."

Why did everything he said make me feel like there was some hidden meaning behind it?

"Very well. Then for bail... yes, given that both the defense and prosecution are in agreement, how about setting it at 160 thousand dollars for the two of them combined?"

Neither I nor Togasaki raised any objections.

"It’s been surprisingly easy to settle this matter. Well then, gentlemen, thank you for your time today. Let’s reconvene here tomorrow."

Thus, our first encounter with Togasaki concluded surprisingly smoothly.

I suddenly remembered the saying about the sea being calm before a storm — this current situation felt exactly like that.

December 13th, 9:00 AM, District Courtroom Number 1

The day had arrived—Friday the 13th, of all days.

The spectator seats were packed to the brim. After all, the peculiar circumstances were that someone who had been acquitted just three days ago was arrested again within 24 hours for another murder. There was no shortage of public sentiment criticizing the police for abuse of power, so it would actually be strange if the case didn’t attract attention.

"Well then, let’s begin the preliminary hearing. Are both sides ready?"

"The prosecution is ready."

"The defense is ready as well."

After I responded following Togasaki, Judge Ikegami nodded approvingly.

"Very well. Prosecutor Togasaki, please begin calling your witnesses."

"The prosecution's first witness is Mr. Watanabe, who discovered the victim's body."

The man named Watanabe appeared to be around university age. He looked like a carefree young man who was more focused on enjoying campus life than on his studies.

"You were in Abuku Town on December 10th, correct?"

"Yes."

"Around 6:00 PM on the 10th, you saw something while crossing a bridge near Abuku Town, didn’t you?"

"Yes."

"Wasn’t that a dead body?"

"Yes."

"The body was caught on the support pillar of the bridge, bent at the waist, correct?"

"Yes."

"And then you immediately reported it to the police, right?"

"Yes."

"That’s all. You may step down."

"Yes, thank you."

"W-Wait just a minute!"

I had completely forgotten that we were in a courtroom and shouted out.

Was that really okay? It ended with just ‘yes.’ Hey, you there, witness! Don’t walk away with that serene smile on your face, satisfied! Are you happy just because you got to testify in court?

I understood that the intention was to have him testify about the circumstances under which the body was found. And yes, leading questions were permitted when eliciting pure facts, but... that was way too blatant. Well, there was no point in raising an objection now, and we couldn't redo it at this point.

"For now, Your Honor, I would like to conduct a cross-examination."

"That’s reasonable. Mr. Watanabe — the witness, correct? Please do not leave yet. We have a few more questions for you."

"Ah, okay."

Hey, witness, at least show a bit more enthusiasm.

And you there, Hyena Prosecutor! Don’t sit there with that smug look on your face as if you’re watching a comedy show! It’s because you conducted such a half-assed examination that this is happening!

"Defense counsel? Please proceed with your cross-examination."

"...Yes, yes, I'm aware. Alright, Mr. Watanabe, I have a few questions for you.

You testified that you discovered the victim's body around 6:00 PM on the 10th, correct?"

"Yes."

"I've been to the bridge where the incident occurred. That bridge is somewhat removed from the townscape of Abuku Town, isn't it?"

"Yes."

"So, why were you at such a remote bridge on the outskirts of town?"

There was no way this bastard Togasaki overlooked such a basic fact-check. I didn't expect this question to become a breakthrough in the case, but you never know where useful information might be found. It was important to ask what needs to be asked.

"Oh, it's nothing significant. I'm staying at a villa on the outskirts of town. That bridge just happened to be on the way there when I was heading into town for the hot springs and a meal."

Staying at a villa in a hot spring town, huh? This rich kid... Well, there was no point in nitpicking that.

"Next question. It should have been quite dark around 6:00 PM in December. Moreover, there weren't many streetlights in that area. How did you notice the body under the bridge in such darkness?"

"Hmm..."

Watanabe tilted his head.

"I figured you'd ask that. It's kind of strange, really. You see, I've always been a bit sensitive to spirits. Even when I was crossing that bridge, I felt a sort of... vibe."

...It took me about three seconds to process what he just said.

"...Excuse me? A vibe?"

"Yes, a vibe. You know, I've had experiences like that before. When I'm in places that have some kind of history, like where people have died in the past, I get this vibe."

"...I see."

"When I was crossing that bridge, I felt the same way. How should I put it... it was like a sixth sense or a sort of signal that just came to me. And then I just knew — there's something here. So I looked around, and sure enough, there it was."

"...I see."

This... this was bad. How the hell was I supposed to respond to this testimony?

Anyone could see that he was talking utter nonsense. A vibe? Really? If such unscientific testimony was accepted, Japan's judicial system would become a laughingstock internationally. To protect the dignity of this country, I pressed on with further questions.

"...Mr. Watanabe, I'd like to ask a bit more about this vibe that you felt."

"Yes. What about it?"

"What exactly do you mean by 'vibe'? Could it be that you heard some kind of noise or perhaps saw a shadow, even for just a moment, and that's what made you curious about what was under the bridge? Isn't there some other cause?"

"No, that's not it."

Watanabe testified more firmly than he had at any point before.

"There was absolutely no one around at that time, and there were no sounds either. But I definitely felt it, that vibe."

"...I see, a vibe, you say."

"Yes, a vibe. Haven't you ever had that kind of experience?"

Well, it wasn't like I had never felt a chill down my spine... W-Wait, what was I doing agreeing with him?

However, this guy was troublesome. Even if I pressed further with something like, "That's ridiculous testimony!" and he responded with, "But that's what I felt!" I'd be at a loss. He genuinely believed what he was saying.

That being said, of course, I didn't believe in the occult at all.

Watanabe was probably someone who was very sensitive — or rather, had sharp nerves. He was likely the type who often felt "vibes" and reflexively looked around. He spouted nonsense about feeling such vibes in places where people had died, but more than likely, the spots where he felt those "vibes" just happened to be places with some kind of history. He had probably also

felt those vibes in completely ordinary places, but people tended to quickly forget things that didn’t fit their narrative.

The location where the body was found was under a bridge over a river. With water flowing beneath, there would be some changes in the airflow. He probably felt a chill on the back of his neck from the wind and mistook that as a "vibe." Then, out of habit, he looked around and happened to find a body — something like that, I’d say. Yes, even I had to admit that was quite a scientific interpretation.

However, if I went with this interpretation, it would mean this witness was merely the first person to discover the body and had no connection to the crime.

Hmm. But there was also the saying that in a murder case, the first person to discover the body should be suspected first, so it wasn't entirely impossible that this guy was the real culprit. I didn’t want to end the cross-examination here and just let him go... But then again, if he were really the culprit, I’d think he’d come up with a better testimony. And if the witness himself was fully convinced that he felt a "vibe," even I couldn’t do much to challenge that.

"I-I have no further questions."

In the end, that was all I could say to wrap it up.

Never in my wildest dreams did I expect the prosecution’s first witness to be one of those "vibe" types.

Thanks to that, Togasaki had completely taken the initiative. Did he call this kind of witness on purpose to throw me off? If so... this was going to be tough.

"Next, I will summon Dr. Honjo, who performed the autopsy on the body."

I recognized the man who took the stand. He was the forensic pathologist who testified in the previous trial. With his lean physique, sharp eyes, and glasses, he looked every bit the scholar specializing in dead bodies.

Togasaki started by having Dr. Honjo testify about his background and the fact that he had conducted the autopsy on the victim, Akiyuki Ichinomiya, before beginning the main questioning.

"First, please testify in detail about the cause of death."

"Understood. To put it simply, the cause of death was drowning. To be more precise, it was suffocation due to the airway being blocked by liquid that entered the body from the outside.

Additionally, it was confirmed that the blood in the left ventricle of the heart was more diluted with water than the blood in the right ventricle. From these traces alone, it’s clear that the cause of death was drowning."

"Wait a minute. How does the dilution of the blood in the left ventricle indicate drowning?"

"Well, that’s because, in the case of drowning, water enters the lungs.

The lungs — more specifically, the numerous alveoli that make up the lungs — are organs that absorb oxygen into the blood. When a large amount of water enters, the alveoli are damaged, and instead of oxygen, water gets absorbed into the bloodstream. As a result, the blood in the pulmonary vein, which connects to the lungs, and the blood in the left ventricle of the heart, which is connected to the pulmonary vein, becomes significantly diluted compared to the blood in the right ventricle.

This phenomenon of blood dilution would never occur if a body that died from causes other than drowning were left in water. After death, blood circulation stops. Therefore, the dilution of the blood in the left ventricle is one of the key factors in determining that the cause of death was drowning."

"I see. So, what is the estimated time of death?"

"Unfortunately, I cannot determine the exact time.

Under normal circumstances, the time of death can be estimated to some extent based on the appearance of livor mortis — the bruising-like marks that occur when blood settles in the body due to gravity — or by comparing the difference between the temperature of the body and the ambient air.

However, in the case of a body floating in water or exposed to flowing water like in a river, the position of the body can shift in the water, and the entire body is subjected to water pressure, so the appearance of livor mortis becomes inconsistent and unreliable.

Moreover, in water, the body temperature changes much faster than in air, making it extremely difficult to estimate the time of death based on rectal temperature.

Especially considering that the river where the body was found flows from Abuku Lake, which is famous for its hot springs. On top of that, wastewater from nearby hot spring facilities sometimes mixes into the lake, making the water temperature highly variable. Given these conditions, it's impossible to estimate the time of death based on the victim’s body temperature.

However, it’s not like there are no clues at all. As anyone who’s spent a long time in a pool or bath knows, the skin starts to wrinkle after being in the water for a while. The same thing

happens with a drowned body; after about two to four or five hours, the skin becomes wrinkled. Of course, there's some variation depending on the water temperature.

In this case, the victim's skin was somewhat wrinkled but had not yet developed those deeper wrinkles. I also heard that the body was discovered around 6:00 PM, and the police retrieved it from the water an hour later, at 7:00 PM.

From these facts, I estimate that the body was disposed of in the water no later than around 5:50 PM."

"Is it possible that the body was disposed of earlier?"

"I can't say it's impossible. But judging from the condition of the skin, I find it hard to believe that the body was in the water for more than two hours. I think it's safe to say that, at the earliest, the body was disposed of in the water around 5:30 PM.

However, this is the time the body was disposed of in the water, not necessarily the time of death."

"And why is that?"

"There is a high possibility that the victim died before being dumped in the river."

...What? What was he talking about? Didn't he just say with certainty that the cause of death was drowning?

At that moment, for some reason, Togasaki paused, deliberately creating a silence.

There was only one reason why a prosecutor would create a pause during testimony: to give the jury time to prepare themselves. In other words, the next piece of testimony was going to be something that would shock everyone.

"Dr. Honjo, just now you testified that there's a high possibility the victim died before being thrown into the river. But at the same time, you also testified that the cause of death was drowning. How do you explain this?"

"What I mean is this. Based on the results of the autopsy, it's highly likely that the victim drowned not in the river but in the sea."

So, that's what he was getting at.

"So, you're saying that after drowning in the sea, the body was later disposed of in the river?"

"That's correct."

I see, this was indeed surprising testimony.

However, if there was an autopsy result like that, I could understand why suspicion fell on the Nioka couple, who were supposed to be far from Abuku Lake. After all, those two were staying at a hotel near the sea.

"Then, Dr. Honjo, could you please testify in detail about the basis for reaching that conclusion?"

"Certainly. Although, it's not really a complicated matter. It's because plankton, which should only exist in the sea, was detected inside the victim's body.

When performing an autopsy on a drowning victim, the first thing we investigate is where the victim drowned. One of the indicators we use for that is plankton.

Plankton can be found wherever there is water. They live not only in the sea but also in rivers, ponds, and even puddles.

As I mentioned earlier, when a person drowns in a river or the sea, water naturally enters the lungs. The lungs are organs that absorb oxygen into the blood. When water containing microscopic plankton enters the lungs, not only the water but also the plankton are absorbed into the blood.

Therefore, in addition to the characteristic of diluted blood that I mentioned earlier, another key feature of drowning victims is that plankton remains in organs such as the kidneys and liver."

"Why the kidneys and liver?"

"Because the liver functions to detoxify harmful substances and store blood, while the kidneys are organs that filter blood to produce urine. So, when blood containing plankton circulates through the body—"

At that point, Dr. Honjo seemed to notice the puzzled faces of the jurors who were struggling to follow his explanation. He cleared his throat and rephrased his statement.

"Let me put it more simply. Essentially, impurities like plankton in the blood are filtered out by the liver and kidneys.

Therefore, by breaking down these organs with strong acids, we can detect only the plankton species with hard shells, such as diatoms."

Hmm, so that's how it worked. Now that I thought about it, I remembered doing an experiment in science class where we dissolved the liver with hydrochloric acid. Was it something like that?

But I must say, trials were places where you ended up learning all sorts of strange knowledge. Though none of it was useful in everyday life.

"Now, Dr. Honjo, for instance, would it be possible to create a similar condition to that of the victim by drowning them in tap water and then pouring seawater into their mouth afterward?"

"No, that would be impossible.

The phenomenon of plankton remaining in the organs, as I mentioned earlier, only occurs when the victim drowns while still alive. We refer to this as a 'vital reaction.'

Even after death, liquid can enter the lungs through the mouth, but without a functioning heart, the blood wouldn't circulate to the kidneys or liver."

"I see, thank you. Now, Dr. Honjo, you mentioned earlier that the victim was murdered at sea and then disposed of in the river.

Does this mean that while plankton species found only in the sea were detected in the organs, the lungs contained a liquid other than seawater — river water?"

"Yes, that's correct.

There was water in the victim's lungs. However, it was fresh water — more precisely, freshwater mixed with hot spring water. Abuku Lake is famous for its hot springs, and the river at the crime scene flows from that lake.

Meanwhile, plankton species like 'Coscinodiscus' and 'Licmophora', which should only exist near the sea, were detected in the liver and kidneys.

Based on these findings, I concluded that the victim was murdered at sea and then disposed of in the river."

'C-Cosinodesks'? 'Lickmohora'? What the heck were those? I could guess from the context that they were plankton names, but... I wish they wouldn't throw around such complicated scientific terms in court. It was a pain to remember.

Even though the plankton names were a bit much, everything Dr. Honjo says made perfect sense. It was amazing how much could be uncovered just by examining a body. I'd better be careful if I ever decided to drown some Hyena Prosecutor in the future.

"Now, moving on—" Togasaki continued. "Is there anything else you discovered about the body?"

"Yes. Upon examining the blood, I found traces of Halcion and alcohol."

"What exactly is Halcion?"

"It’s a hypnotic — essentially, a sleeping pill."

"You testified that both Halcion and alcohol were detected. Is there any significance to that?"

"Yes, there is. Halcion is contraindicated with alcohol."

"Could you be more specific? What happens when someone takes both simultaneously?"

"The person would likely become drowsy within minutes and fall into a state of stupor within ten minutes."

"So, it’s reasonable to assume that the victim was in such a stupor?"

"Yes. Given that both Halcion and alcohol were found in the blood, there’s no doubt."

"In other words, the victim was sedated before drowning?"

"Yes, I can say that with certainty. The victim’s body had no significant external injuries. This suggests that there was no struggle, supporting the theory that the victim was sedated."

"Thank you. By the way, is Halcion an easily obtainable drug?"

"No, it’s generally not available without a prescription from a doctor.

However, it’s said that a significant amount has been circulating illegally lately. Since Halcion is a powerful hypnotic, some people have tried to misuse it. For example, when there’s a burglary at a pharmacy, the first thing the police check is whether the Halcion is safe."

Right. I had heard that name on the news from time to time.

"So, conversely, as long as you have a prescription, anyone can easily obtain it, right?"

"Yes, that’s correct."

"No further questions. Defense, your cross-examination."

The gall of this guy.

"There’s something about your testimony that caught my attention..."

I began my cross-examination.

"You testified that when a body has been in water for about two hours, the skin starts to wrinkle. In this case, the victim had no such wrinkles, which led you to conclude that the body was dumped in the river no earlier than 5:30 PM."

"Yes, that’s correct."

"This suggests that the victim could have been killed at sea earlier — say, around 3:00 or 4:00 PM, and then later disposed of in the river at 5:30 PM, as you mentioned, correct?"

"Regarding that—"

Togasaki butted in where he wasn’t needed.

"We plan to explain that through the testimony of another witness we’ll be summoning later. According to that witness, the victim was alive in another location at least until 4:00 PM—"

"Prosecutor Togasaki, nobody asked you."

I forcefully silenced Togasaki with a stern tone.

Togasaki’s purpose in butting in was to provide the jury with prejudicial information against the defense. But I wasn't going to let that happen.

"However, I was also informed in advance that the victim was alive until 4:00 PM."

...Dr. Honjo’s testimony easily undid my efforts.

"Moving on—"

I continued, maintaining a calm demeanor as if to say, "So what?"

"For example, Doctor, if someone had preemptively collected seawater and then killed the victim by pressing their face into that seawater, wouldn’t the result be similar to the current condition of the victim?"

The victim had a hobby of keeping saltwater fish. There might be some connection.

"I see, it’s not entirely impossible. However, unless the victim was completely submerged in the sea, merely pressing their face into seawater... I’m not sure. While it’s possible that their airway could be blocked and they might suffocate, I find it hard to believe that enough seawater would enter the lungs to be absorbed into the body."

"Then, for instance, what if someone prepared a bathtub filled with seawater and submerged the victim in it?"

"Your Esteemed Honor, if I may."

Unexpectedly, Togasaki stood up, a mocking smile on his face.

"It appears the defense counsel is somewhat sleep-deprived. Drowning someone in a bathtub filled with seawater? Oh dear, it seems the defense counsel must be dreaming. Or perhaps they have some special skill that allows them to dream while awake? I would like to formally object to this baseless and delusional line of questioning, which only serves to confuse the jury."

I could feel my temple twitching.

Fine, two could play this game.

"How desperate you must be, Prosecutor, to cover up the possibility you overlooked. Filling a bathtub with seawater and drowning a sedated victim — that aligns perfectly with the autopsy findings, doesn't it?

Let me remind you, Prosecutor, whose thinking seems to be somewhat impaired, of the basics of criminal trials. We, the defense, are not obligated to prove the victim's innocence. It is your responsibility, the prosecution's, to prove guilt beyond a reasonable doubt.

You say I'm sleep-deprived? Fine, I have no intention of discussing the fact that your eyes are clearly faulty. But before that, I would like you to first explain why it would be impossible to drown the victim in a bathtub filled with seawater."

"Very well. Let me explain. First of all, for plankton to accumulate in the liver, one would need highly specialized knowledge—"

And just as Togasaki was saying this—

A loud, piercing sound echoed through the courtroom.

Even as "Desk Breaker," I couldn't produce such a loud noise.

The source of the sound was — the judge's gavel.

"...If the two of you wish to continue your conversation, I can call a recess. How about it?"

The judge's tone was polite, but his eyes were fixed. Oh no, it seemed he didn't appreciate this kind of argument.

For once, neither I nor Togasaki could come up with a response, and the judge continued in a stern tone.

"Good, it seems a recess is not necessary. There is no need for the prosecution and the defense to engage in debates with each other. All statements should be directed toward this trial. Furthermore, at this stage, neither of you has the right to express your opinions."

"You are absolutely right, Your Esteemed Honor. My apologies."

Togasaki immediately bowed his head. To me, it didn't look like a sincere apology at all, but in situations like this, the first to apologize won, no matter the form.

"...I'll be more careful going forward."

I quickly followed up, but I couldn't shake the feeling that I had lost to the Hyena Prosecutor.

"Very well, then let's continue with the proceedings.

Defense counsel, could you repeat your earlier question?"

"*Sigh* Yes, of course."

I turned back to the witness stand and recalled the question I had asked earlier.

"Dr. Honjo, for instance, if someone had prepared a bathtub filled with seawater, and then drowned a victim who had been sedated, wouldn't that produce a condition consistent with your autopsy findings?"

"I object on the grounds that this is a baseless and irrelevant question," Togasaki interrupted.

"Overruled. The witness will answer the question."

"Well, I wouldn't say the possibility is zero."

"Thank you, that's all I wanted to know."

Ugh, I had hoped that by introducing some reasonable doubt, I could weaken the impact of the prosecution's case. But thanks to the Hyena Prosecutor's unnecessary arguments, the impact was completely lost. Well, it's true that it was hard to imagine anyone going to the trouble of filling a bathtub with seawater just to leave plankton as evidence, and even if someone did, they'd probably leave some trace that would get them caught.

It was a bad habit of lawyers to make claims that even they didn't really believe.

"The next witness is Mr. Shozo Kasai."

Shozo Kasai. He was the primary physician of Shoko Ichinomiya, who committed suicide recently. After having Kasai take the oath, Togasaki first had him testify about that matter before moving on to the main topic.

"You have a personal relationship with one of the defendants, Mr. Koji Nioka, correct?"

"Yes, somewhat. He was the son-in-law of a very important patient of mine."

"On the 9th of this month, one day before the previous trial began, he consulted you, didn't he?"

"Yes."

"What was the nature of that consultation?"

"He said he was so nervous about the trial that he couldn't sleep, but he needed to be well-rested for it, so he asked me for some sleeping pills."

"And what did you do?"

"Well, I understood his feelings quite well, so I wrote him a prescription and instructed him to go to the local pharmacy."

"The sleeping pills, were they Halcion?"

"Yes."

"How many days' worth did you prescribe?"

"At the time, I didn't expect the trial to end in one day, so I prescribed three days' worth."

"Cross-examination."

Damn it, he wrapped it up so quickly. It was frustrating when he dragged things out, but it was also annoying when he finished so nonchalantly. Well, I guess I was just irritated by his very existence.

"No cross-examination."

A few spectators looked surprised. They were probably expecting one of my fierce cross-examinations.

But unfortunately, I had already heard from Koji Nioka that he had been prescribed sleeping pills. When he testified so simply about the facts, there was nothing to challenge.

"Well then, Prosecutor Togasaki. Please call your next witness."

"Your Honor, today's testimony has been quite technical, and calling any more witnesses may place an undue burden on the jury.

Therefore, I would like to request that we conclude for today."

"I understand. Defense, do you have any objections?"

"No, none."

Since I needed as much time as possible for Kageno's investigation, I had no reason to reject the Hyena Prosecutor's proposal.

"Very well. Then we shall continue tomorrow.

Now, members of the jury, let me remind you that today's proceedings are now concluded, but once you leave this courtroom, you must not discuss this case with anyone, nor listen to anyone else discussing it.

Until all evidence has been presented, you must refrain from forming any opinions on whether the defendant is guilty or not, and you are prohibited from expressing any opinion related to this trial. After you return home, you should also avoid watching television or reading newspapers that cover this case.

Additionally, should you experience any form of interference or pressure related to this trial, you must report it immediately. Is that clear?"

The judge watched as the jurors nodded, then picked up his gavel.

"Then today's proceedings are adjourned. Thank you all for your time."

Bam — the gavel sounded.

◆

"Now we know how the prosecution is going to play it."

As we walked back to the car after leaving the courtroom, I said to Kageno, "So, they're saying the victim was killed at sea and then dumped in the river. The progress of science is impressive; they can figure out that much."

"Why are you so impressed? So, what should I be investigating?"

"Not much has changed. Keep looking into the alibis of any suspicious parties and digging for any mistakes the police might have made."

"Yeah, yeah."

It was still the first day of the trial. For now, we'd have to keep waiting to see how the prosecution played its hand.

Tomorrow, the prosecution would likely try to prove that both defendants were at the seaside with the victim around 4 PM on the day of the incident.

That would remind everyone of the autopsy result, which indicated that the victim died at sea.

This point would undoubtedly put us at a disadvantage. Moreover, I couldn't imagine the prosecution's witnesses would be limited to just that. There was no way they would arrest someone based on such a flimsy reason. They were sure to present some other physical evidence that tied the defendants to this case.

If I was going to launch a counterattack, it wouldn't be until after that became clear.

...Which meant, tomorrow would essentially be Togasaki's show. Just thinking about that made me feel a bit uneasy...

第三章
ワンサイドゲーム

Chapter 3: One-Sided Game

December 14th, 10:00 AM, District Courtroom Number 1

Even though it was a Saturday — or perhaps because it was a Saturday — the courtroom was packed to capacity today as well.

The judge looked around at the fully occupied gallery, then directed his gaze to the jury.

"Members of the jury, I would like to express my sincere gratitude for your attendance today, with every member present. Now, between yesterday and this morning, has anyone attempted to contact you or influence you regarding this case in any way?

...It seems there are no issues. Very well. Prosecutor Togasaki, please proceed."

"As our first witness today, I would like to call Mr. Tsutomu Ikegaya."

The man who entered the courtroom was an older fellow who looked a bit weathered. He was probably around sixty years old.

"What is your occupation?"

"I'm a cleaner."

"Where do you primarily work?"

"At 'Seaside Hill Park,' a park by the seaside, just a few minutes' drive from here."

"You were working at that park around 4 PM on December 10th, the day of the incident, correct?"

"Yes, I was cleaning as usual."

I understood then what the prosecution intended to have this witness testify about.

Around 4 PM, at a seaside park. There was only one thing that could imply. As expected, there was indeed an eyewitness somewhere.

"You saw three individuals there, didn't you?"

"Yes."

"Two of those individuals are present here in this courtroom now, correct?"

"Yes, they are."

"Please point them out... Yes, that’s fine.

Just now, you pointed to the two defendants, correct?"

"Yes, it was those two."

"Now, who was the third person — the other individual?"

"That evening, I saw a photo on the news. It was Mr. Akiyuki Ichinomiya, the victim in this case."

"Very well. Finally, why do you remember the three people you saw while you were cleaning?"

"Well, you see, it’s that time of year. The Sea of Japan was a bit rough, and it’s a seaside park. Cold winds were blowing fiercely. And it was a weekday afternoon. Normally, no one comes around at that time. But there were three people there... so it left a rather strong impression on me."

"What were the three of them doing, and what were they talking about?"

"Well, the wind was strong, and they were a bit far away, so I couldn’t make out what they were saying.

But, I could tell from the atmosphere that those two over there were speaking to the elderly man in a harsh tone."

"Did it look like they were threatening or interrogating him?"

I slammed my hand on the desk.

"Objection! Leading the witness."

"Sustained. Please rephrase the question."

"That won’t be necessary; I have no further questions."

As expected, Togasaki showed no sign of being rattled at all.

Leading questions like that could influence the thoughts of others just by being heard.

It was now established that the two defendants had met with the victim around 4 PM. On top of that, the jury surely now had the impression from that leading question that the defendants seemed to be interrogating the victim at that time.

Indeed, it wass likely true that the two spoke to him in a harsh tone. They themselves had admitted as much. But that was only natural — they were trying to stop their father-in-law, who was in a state where he might have committed suicide after drinking alcohol.

However, the situation didn't allow us to reveal that just yet. Following the Nioka couple's claim, I had set forth the argument that the cause of death was suicide. If this claim held up, it could turn the trial around in our favor. In any case, we'd make our move after the prosecution had presented all their evidence and we had seen their hand.

"Defense counsel, you may cross-examine the witness."

Cross-examination. Now, what to do?

Normally, I would begin by thoroughly questioning the witness about what they saw.

'Are you certain that the three people you saw were the defendants and the victim? How good is your memory? How far away were you? What is your eyesight like?'

However, it seemed that the Nioka couple had already told the police that they met with the victim at the seaside.

If that was the case... I'd bet that no matter how much I tried to refute the testimony now, the prosecution would later put the detective who interrogated the Nioka couple on the stand to testify that they admitted to being with the victim at the seaside.

If that was the case, there was only one course of action to take now.

"No cross-examination."

"Next, we will call Detective Kusaka to the stand."

The detective who took the stand was someone I recognized. He had been in charge of the investigation during the previous trial as well. With a body as tough as a boxer who had cut weight, and a stern face that wouldn't look out of place on a yakuza, he was an imposing figure.

However, today, for some reason, he looked pale and gaunt, frequently rubbing his stomach.

Well, it had been three days since the incident occurred. He had probably been under a lot of stress working under Togasaki. Maybe I should give him my business card later. I could even

write on the back, "Feel free to contact me if you ever want to sue your boss for unfair labor practices."

Even so, when his eyes met Togasaki's, he instantly straightened his posture and delivered his oath with a dignified attitude. That's a detective for you.

Following standard procedure, Togasaki first had Detective Kusaka testify about the nature of his usual duties and the many difficult cases he had been involved in — though not solved, notably — before moving on to the main interrogation.

"You were involved in the investigation of this case as one of the detectives, correct?"

"Yes."

"Let's start with December 10th, the day of the incident.

What time did you arrive at the crime scene on the 10th?"

"Just before 7 PM."

The roads in that area were closed to traffic due to ice around 7 or 8 PM. Since the first report of the body was at 6 PM, it seemed he just made it in time.

Too bad. If the roads had been closed and they had to leave the body there overnight, it would have been a great point to attack.

"What did you do when you arrived at the scene?"

"First, I took photographs of the scene. Then... the body was caught on the pillar of a bridge over a small river. So, we first retrieved the body, then conducted a search of the surrounding area and interviewed witnesses. While we sent the body for autopsy, we also began investigating to identify the victim."

"Did you identify the victim quickly?"

"Yes. In fact, I had seen the victim myself just four days earlier. Right here in this courtroom."

"Oh, you met him in this very place.

So, what was the victim doing at this courthouse four days ago?"

"Objection!"

I immediately slammed my fist down.

"That question has nothing to do with this trial."

"Oh, Counsel Yamashika, since when did you become such a stickler for formalities?

You should know how deeply connected the previous case is to this trial."

"...Prosecutor Togasaki," the judge interjected in a weary voice. "If you could direct your argument against the objection to the court rather than the defense counsel, it would be appreciated."

"My apologies, Your Esteemed Honor."

There was no one who suited the word "unrepentant" better than this guy.

"Allow me to rephrase.

The defendant in the trial held just four days ago was Mr. Koji Nioka, the same defendant as in this case, and the victim was Mrs. Shoko Ichinomiya, the wife of Mr. Akiyuki Ichinomiya, who was killed in the current case. To understand the circumstances that led to this incident, it is necessary to know what kind of trial took place here four days ago.

I hate to bring this up, but Your Esteemed Honor, you presided over the previous trial as well, so I believe you would agree with me."

"...Well, you are indeed correct. The defense's objection must be overruled. You may continue."

Well, this objection would have been overruled even if it had been a different judge.

"With permission granted, let us continue. Detective Kusaka, the trial where you previously saw the victim was related to a murder charge, correct?"

"Yes."

"The defendant in that trial was Mr. Koji Nioka, who is also one of the defendants in this trial, correct?"

"Yes."

"And the victim in that trial was Mrs. Shoko Ichinomiya, the wife of Mr. Akiyuki Ichinomiya, correct?"

"That’s correct."

This should be quite a critical piece of testimony. After all, it had come to light that within just a few days, one man was implicated in consecutive murder charges. However, neither the spectators nor the jury seemed particularly surprised. I suppose that was to be expected. This case had already been covered so extensively by talk shows and news reports that there was hardly anything left to say. The judge had warned the jury to avoid exposure to the media, but this much information would have reached their ears regardless.

"Now, please testify to the details of that trial."

"Understood."

Detective Kusaka began to describe in detail the trial that took place here just a few days ago.

Well, it was mostly information everyone probably already knew. Shoko Ichinomiya was found hanged, and Koji Nioka was suspected of her death. However, the trial ended with the prosecution dropping the charges after I argued that Shoko Ichinomiya's death was a suicide, not a murder. Koji Nioka was released immediately.

I could have objected repeatedly, claiming these were irrelevant questions meant to harass, but in this particular case, I remained silent. It was more effective to adopt the position that this testimony was in no way disadvantageous to the defense rather than risking the jury forming a negative impression of us by making futile objections.

"Very well. Now, please testify about the investigation you conducted at the scene."

"Understood. First, the body we recovered from the river showed no noticeable injuries or signs of restraint, nor were there any indications that valuables like a wallet or watch had been stolen. From this, we surmised that the murder was not likely the result of a robbery.

We then contacted the prefectural police headquarters, requesting that they notify the victim's family, and asked them to get in touch with Mr. Nioka, who was the victim's son-in-law. Meanwhile, we proceeded with our investigation of the surrounding area."

"What did your investigation reveal?"

"At that stage, the investigation yielded little of significance. The area is naturally sparsely populated, and visibility becomes extremely poor after dark. We also interviewed Mr. Watanabe, who testified yesterday as the person who reported the body, but nothing of note came from that."

Hmm. Hearing this made me even more curious about that strange man who was the first to discover the body… but then again, he was just a strange man.

"However, around 7:30 PM, there was a development.

At that time, the Nioka couple had been summoned to the headquarters and were being questioned. As a result, certain facts came to light—"

"Hold on a moment, Detective Kusaka.

You were at the crime scene in Abuku Town, correct? You weren't the one who questioned the Nioka couple at the prefectural police headquarters, were you?"

"No, it was another detective stationed at headquarters."

"What is that detective's name?"

"Detective Kamei."

At this point, Togasaki turned to the judge.

"Your Esteemed Honor, as you just heard, I would like to call Detective Kamei as the next witness."

"Understood. But before that, defense counsel, do you have any cross-examination?"

"Based on Detective Kusaka's testimony, it seems we won't understand the full picture of the incident without hearing Detective Kamei's testimony.

Therefore, I believe the defense has the right to reserve its cross-examination of Detective Kusaka until after we hear from Detective Kamei."

"That is indeed reasonable. Very well, please call Detective Kamei to the stand."

Detective Kamei, like most people in his line of work, was a middle-aged man with a tough, stern look. As usual, the most fitting description would be that he looked like a yakuza.

After wrapping up the standard preliminary questions about his background and experience, Togasaki moved into the main line of questioning.

"You were one of the detectives involved in the investigation of this case, correct?"

"Yes."

"Please testify about your actions around 7 PM on the 10th of this month."

"Yes. At that time, I was at the station when I received a request from Detective Kusaka. He informed me that Mr. Akiyuki Ichinomiya's body had been found, and asked me to contact his family, the Nioka couple, as soon as possible.

Since we had Mr. Nioka's cell phone number from the previous case, I quickly contacted them and asked if they could come to the station."

"What did the defendants say?"

"They said they would come right away."

"What time did they actually arrive at the station?"

"Around 7:15 PM. By coincidence, they happened to be not far from the station."

7:15 PM. Just after they left the hotel.

"What did you do after they arrived at the station?"

"First, I informed them that Mr. Akiyuki Ichinomiya's body had been found."

"How did the two of them react?"

"They seemed extremely shocked."

"What did you do next?"

"I asked them when and where they last saw Mr. Ichinomiya."

"What did the defendants say?"

"They said the last time they saw him was around 4 PM on December 10th, by the seaside near 'Seaside Hill Park'."

"What did they say they talked about with him there?"

"According to the two of them, Mr. Ichinomiya was deeply depressed after losing his wife to suicide. He summoned them there and apparently hinted that he intended to follow her in taking his own life."

"I see. That must be a very convenient story for the defendants."

"Your Honor!" I called out in protest.

"My apologies, I withdraw my previous comment."

If I had a penny for every time I wanted to rip that man's tongue out…

"Now, Detective Kamei, what happened next?"

"Yes. Naturally, at that time, we didn't suspect them of being the perpetrators — or rather, suspects — at all.

But then, a patrol officer who was at the station by chance made an unexpected discovery."

"What is the name of that officer?"

"Officer Suguru Kinoshita."

Suguru Kinoshita…? That name sounded familiar.

Togasaki turned to the judge once again.

"Your Esteemed Honor, as you just heard, I would like to call Officer Kinoshita as the next witness."

"Hmm. I have no objections, but… defense counsel, do you have any input?"

Hmm. Could this be Togasaki's strategy to suppress my cross-examination and seize control of the pace? However, if I were to conduct a cross-examination now without knowing the full scope of the testimony, there was no telling what kind of trap I might fall into. I should hold back here.

"The defense would like to reserve the right to cross-examine for the same reasons as before."

"Very well. Prosecutor Togasaki, please call your next witness."

"Then, I would like to call Officer Suguru Kinoshita to the stand."

The moment I saw the middle-aged man who eventually entered the courtroom, I recalled who he was.

Officer Kinoshita. He was stationed in Abuku Town. Though he had already reached middle age, he was still a patrol officer and worked in a rural area like Abuku Town, making him, in a sense, a rather unusual policeman.

In the previous case where Shoko Ichinomiya was found dead, Officer Kinoshita was the first officer to arrive at the scene and was responsible for securing the area. I never imagined he would be involved in this case as well...

"Officer Kinoshita. Where were you around 7:30 PM on December 10th?"

"At the prefectural police station."

"You're stationed in Abuku Town, right? Why were you at the prefectural police station?"

"I was there to work on something related to the case involving Shoko Ichinomiya's death, which was mentioned earlier."

"You found the defendants' car in the parking lot of the police station, correct?"

"Yes."

"How did you know that car belonged to the defendants?"

"Because the incident involving Shoko Ichinomiya happened in Abuku Town, where I'm stationed, so I was involved in various aspects of the investigation. During that process, I had several opportunities to see the defendants' car, so I naturally remembered it."

"What did you do after that?"

"At that time, I already knew that the Nioka couple had come to the station for questioning related to the discovery of Akiyuki Ichinomiya's body.

So... I decided to inspect the car on a whim."

I didn't miss the slight frown that crossed Togasaki's face at that moment.

Kinoshita's testimony must not have been to his liking. Knowing that Hyena Prosecutor, he had probably gone through some meticulous rehearsals, but it seemed Officer Kinoshita couldn't keep up.

"So you inspected the defendants' car?"

"Yes."

"And what did you find?"

"I noticed that several small stones were lodged in the tire treads."

"These small stones—"

For some reason, Togasaki picked up an empty plastic bag, approached the stand, and handed it to Officer Kinoshita.

"Are you referring to these?"

"Yes, that’s right. There’s no doubt about it."

Kinoshita nodded as he looked at the empty plastic bag. Well, it might not actually be empty, even though it looked that way from a distance. Judging by the conversation, it seemed the bag contained small stones that could get stuck in tire treads...

"Officer Kinoshita, why did these small stones catch your attention?"

"Because I work in Abuku Town, which is famous for its hot springs.

At first glance, these small stones look just like regular stones, but their surfaces are yellowish in color. This is due to sulfur. In the area around Abuku Lake, where hot springs bubble up, there are some places where sulfur seeps out. The yellow color on these stones is from prolonged exposure to that sulfur."

At this point, the Hyena Prosecutor pulled out a large panel. It appeared to be some kind of map.

"Officer Kinoshita. Do you know what this is?"

"Yes. It’s a map of the area surrounding Abuku Lake."

"Could you use this map to explain the geographical relationships? First, where is Abuku Town on this map?"

"It’s in the southeastern area."

"Where was the victim’s body found?"

"In the western part of Abuku Town — southwest of the lake. You can see a small river in that area on the map. That’s the spot."

"And where is the area where sulfur is seeping out?"

"You can see a slight protrusion on the map just west of Abuku Lake. Yes, right there. That’s where the sulfur seeps out."

"I see. Next, could you explain what kind of place that is?"

"Understood. Although, it’s really not much of a place. It’s just a rocky area, like a riverbank.

...No, it’s not exactly a riverbank, since it’s by a lake, not a river. Uh, a lakeshore? Which kind of reminds me of 'lunchtime', and I’m starting to get a little hungry, just kidding—"

"..."

"..."

Silence fell.

Even though both Togasaki and I are good at making quips, this time, we had no choice but to let it slide. No one even chuckled, and an indescribable atmosphere filled the courtroom.

Realizing he had gone too far, sweat began to trickle down Officer Kinoshita’s forehead.

Still, who exactly was this middle-aged man? In the last trial, he testified so dispassionately, but this time, he was unusually high-strung.

"Officer Kinoshita. Is it possible for cars to drive into that area?"

Togasaki continued as if nothing had happened. This time, I had to admit I was a bit impressed by his unflinching demeanor.

"Y-Yes, it’s definitely possible. It’s right next to the road."

"So the fact that these stones, which can only be found in that area, were lodged in the tires suggests that the defendants drove their car to that location?"

"Objection!"

I slammed my hand down on the desk. The sudden loud noise made the spectators flinch.

"That question calls for speculation from the witness, and it’s also suggestive and leading. I object."

"Very well, let’s rephrase the question."

Togasaki carried on with a calm demeanor, as if he had anticipated my objection.

Damn, I might have fallen into a trap by letting myself get too worked up. That outburst probably made it seem to the jury like I desperately didn’t want that fact to be established.

"Officer Kinoshita. If one were to drive around Abuku Town, could such stones get lodged in the tires?"

"That's unlikely. The only area where sulfur seeps from the ground is the place I just described. There's no way you'd find such yellow stones lying around in town... Well, I won't say it's completely impossible. But even if it were just one stone, it's hard to imagine several small stones like these getting stuck in the tires."

"Lastly, let me ask you this: is that area where sulfur is seeping out a place that people frequently visit?"

Officer Kinoshita sneered, as if showing off.

"No one visits a place like that. There are no fish in Abuku Lake, so you can't fish there, and even though sulfur is seeping out, it's not like it's billowing out like smoke, so it's not a tourist attraction. In fact, some people feel sick just being in that area, and there are even signs posted warning people to stay away.

Well, given that it's near a tourist spot, it doesn't see much foot traffic, and while the view isn't all that bad, you do get the occasional group of young people who pull up just to fool around."

"In other words, it's highly unlikely that ordinary people would drive into that area, correct?"

"Yes, that's right. Unless, for example, they had something heavy they didn't want anyone to see, and were planning to dump it in the lake."

"Objection! That statement is pure speculation on the part of the witness and could lead to a biased and incorrect perception by those who hear it! The defense requests that the judge instruct the jury to disregard the witness's statement!"

Even the judge's expression turned stern at this point.

"The defense's objection and request are sustained. Members of the jury, you are instructed to disregard the witness's last statement.

Officer Kinoshita, you are standing there as a police officer, not an ordinary citizen. You should have sufficient knowledge of court procedures. Refrain from making unnecessary statements."

"Yes, I apologize."

Officer Kinoshita had a slight smirk on his face at the witness stand. Perhaps that unnecessary comment was something Togasaki had suggested, but either way, seeing that look on his face made my blood boil. Next time, I'd pound his head instead of the desk.

Damn it, Togasaki was good. His method of presenting evidence was masterful.

First, he conducted an obviously leading examination, planting the idea in the jury's minds that "the defendants' car might have gone to the lakeshore of Abuku Lake." Leading questions were themselves a form of suggestion, so my objection probably didn't have much effect.

Then, he went on to suggest an answer to the question of "why the defendants drove to the lakeshore of Abuku Lake" to the jury.

The jury must now undoubtedly be thinking this: after drowning Akiyuki Ichinomiya at sea, the defendants then drove to Abuku Lake, parked their car at the deserted lakeshore where no one would see them, and disposed of the body. And that body eventually drifted into the river and got caught on the bridge.

I felt an urge to ask the Nioka couple sitting next to me whether they had ever driven to the spot where sulfur was supposedly seeping out. But if I were to have a private conversation with my clients here and now, it might look like we were shaken by the truth being presented to us.

In the end, I decided to cross my arms and wait calmly for the next development.

At this point, Togasaki turned to the judge and said,

"Your Honor, the prosecution would like to submit two items into evidence.

One is this small stone collected from the defendants' car, and the second is a photograph showing the stone lodged in the car's tire. We have made additional copies of the photo so that the jury may examine them closely."

"Does the defense have any objections?"

"Before I comment on that, I'd like to first see this stone and the photograph in question."

There's no denying that my words had a slight edge to them.

"Hmm. That seems reasonable."

The judge instructed the bailiff, and a plastic bag containing the stone along with several photographs was first handed to me.

The stone was indeed a round one, the kind you might find on a lakeshore or riverbank, with a total of five stones in the bag. As Officer Kinoshita testified, they had a yellowish tint.

An idea occurred to me, and I opened the zipper of the plastic bag to sniff its contents. I didn't really want to do it because it might look like I was inhaling thinner, but I couldn't afford to worry about appearances.

I could faintly detect a sulfur-like smell, or at least I thought I could. Honestly, I wasn't entirely sure, but given how strongly the prosecution had insisted, there was no doubt that this yellow substance was sulfur.

As for the photographs — there was no room for objection.

There was one photo showing the entire car, and three more showing the tire from various distances and angles. Yellowish small stones were indeed lodged in the tire treads.

"Hey, is this your car?"

I showed the photos to Koji Nioka, who was sitting beside me.

"Y-Yes, there's no mistake about it."

Nioka nodded with a deeply troubled expression.

Well, I had to admit that the prosecution wouldn't be sloppy about something this basic; after all, they could verify it by checking the car's license plate.

"Do you have any objections?"

This question wasn't from the judge, but from that Hyena Prosecutor. I didn't even want to imagine what kind of face he was making.

"Your Honor, the defense would like to conduct a cross-examination of this witness."

It might be a risky move, but if that testimony stands and the stone is smoothly admitted as evidence, it could put us in a bad position. I needed to challenge it a bit.

"Understood. Go ahead."

"Well then — Officer Kinoshita. The two defendants had been staying in Abuku Town for several days before the incident occurred.

Can you categorically state that they did not visit that sulfur-seeping lakeshore during their stay?"

"As I've said many times, that place is not a path people frequently pass through, and it's certainly not a place that tourists would visit. It's highly unlikely."

"Oh really. Then can you say you've never once in your life gotten lost?"

"Uh. N-No, well... I have gotten lost before."

"Then, you can't deny the possibility that the defendants might have visited that location by car long before the incident occurred, can you?

And you also can't prove when the stones lodged in the car's tires actually got there, can you?"

"Ugh, well — that's true, but—"

Suddenly, Officer Kinoshita clapped his hands as if something had just occurred to him.

"Ah, you're absolutely right. For example, even if it was before the incident, it's possible they were driving around looking for a place to dump the body."

There was a chuckle from the audience.

Ugh, this guy. I underestimated him as just a middle-aged police officer who missed his chance at promotion. But he had a sharp mind in unexpected ways.

"T-Then, the next question. You said you found the defendants' car by chance and decided to inspect it on a whim — didn't you?"

"Yes, that's right."

"Isn't it illegal for a law enforcement officer to search someone's private property without a warrant?"

"Objection."

Togasaki quietly stood up.

"It could be said that the defense's argument overly expands the interpretation of the law. If we start calling something as minor as checking out a car parked on the street illegal, the only ones who would benefit would be criminals and lawyers."

There were chuckles of laughter. It was the first time I realized that even the hyena could crack a joke.

"Moreover, Officer Kinoshita did not open the doors or trunk of the defendants' car without permission, nor did he even touch it. He merely approached and observed it. Defense counsel,

are you saying that you have never been curious about a car parked nearby and approached it?"

Damn it, how annoyingly meticulous.

"Prosecutor Togasaki, perhaps you should leave it at that."

Finally, the judge stepped in to caution him.

"I've said this many times, but I do not favor direct verbal exchanges between the prosecution and defense. Please address your remarks to everyone present."

"Understood. My apologies."

Togasaki bowed gracefully. How many times was this now?

"That being said, in this situation, it's hard to see how the police investigation was illegal. Defense counsel, please proceed with your next question."

"No, I have no further questions."

If I could have proven that the evidence collection was illegal, it would have been an easy win, but it seemed Togasaki had prepared a defense against that as well. I would have to give up on that avenue.

...And as I thought that, I suddenly realized I was in a bit of a shock. This whole day had been full of things where I had no choice but to "give up" or "back down." How could I let myself be so easily overwhelmed? I had no option but to win, and yet here I was. This was why I hated facing off against that Hyena Prosecutor. Wasn't there someone out there with a sense of justice who would take him out? If there was, I'd gladly take up their defense if they were arrested for murder. And I'd do it for free—

In the end, I couldn't prevent the stone and the photographs from being admitted as evidence, and the trial proceeded just as Togasaki intended.

At this point, Togasaki once again called Detective Kamei to the witness stand.

"Detective Kamei. Could you please testify again about the process leading to the defendants' arrest?"

"Understood. Uh, where did I leave off?"

"You were talking about how Officer Kinoshita found the small stones in the defendants' car."

"Ah, I remember now.

When I was questioning the Nioka couple, Officer Kinoshita told me about the stones. So first, I asked the Nioka couple to stay at the station for a while."

"And why did you do that?"

"The reason I had them come to the station in the first place was because they were the victim's relatives. However, if, as Officer Kinoshita suggested, they had been near where the body was found, it couldn't be ruled out that they were involved in the crime. After hearing their story, I initially thought the victim's death might have been a suicide, but until that was clearly proven, I decided it would be best to have them stay at the station for a while. Of course, they agreed to this."

"And what did you do next?"

"I investigated whether the small stones that Officer Kinoshita found could really only be found in that specific area around Abuku Lake."

"And how did you investigate that?"

"First, I contacted Detective Kusaka, who was in Abuku Town, and had him go to the place where Officer Kinoshita said the sulfur was seeping out to collect some stones. As a result, we found that the characteristics of those stones matched the small stones lodged in the tires of the defendants' car."

"And then what did you do?"

"We thought there was a possibility that the two of them might be involved in the case in some way, but at that point, we didn't have anything we could definitively call proof. So, we used a simple method to rule out that possibility."

"And what was that?"

"We asked them about their alibi."

I see, that made sense.

"And what did they say?"

"They said that from around 4:00 PM to 7:00 PM, they were resting at the hotel."

Resting at the hotel. For a brief moment, there was a strange look in the eyes of the spectators as they glanced at the defendants. Well, I wasn't the one to be embarrassed here, so I decided to let it go.

"And then what did you do?"

"Yes. We conducted an investigation to corroborate the story we heard from the Nioka couple, and we also traced the victim's movements.

Specifically, we first searched the beach where the three of them were said to have been talking until around 4:00 PM, and then we went to the hotel called 'Lovers' where the Nioka couple said they were resting."

'Lovers'. No matter how many times I heard it, the name was just too straightforward.

"Please testify to the results."

"First, we discovered a relatively fresh beer can in a trash bin near the location where the three of them were allegedly talking. The forensic analysis, which came in early the next morning, confirmed that the can had both the victim's fingerprints and saliva on it.

As for the hotel, the nature of the place is such that the reception is designed so that guests don't have to face the staff. Moreover, while it's mandatory to fill out the guest register if you're staying overnight, you don't have to do so if you're just resting.

However, there was a security camera installed at the hotel entrance, so we analyzed the footage.

As a result, we were able to confirm that the defendants entered the hotel a little after 4:00 PM and left around 7:00 PM. But we found no evidence proving that they stayed in the room from 4:00 PM to 7:00 PM. The camera was installed in a visible location, so it would have been easy for them to come and go without being caught on tape. In other words, we couldn't even tell if they entered the room."

"So while it's certain that the defendants were at the hotel at 4:00 PM and 7:00 PM, this could not serve as an alibi?"

"Yes, exactly."

"Very well. Please continue."

"I returned to the station and tried to extract more detailed information from the two of them. But after that, they claimed they had been instructed by their lawyer to remain silent, so we couldn't obtain any new information."

Ouch. Was that really such bad timing?

"The next change in the situation came the following morning when the results of the judicial autopsy were revealed."

"The results of the autopsy showed that the victim was killed at sea and then the body was disposed of in a river, correct?"

"Yes. We also conducted an experiment comparing the small stones collected from the defendants' car with the ones Detective Kusaka collected from the west side of Abuku Lake."

"What was the result?"

"We confirmed that the same type of sulfur was attached to both."

An all-night investigation, what a tough job. If all government officials worked as hard as you guys, this country would be a much better place.

"By the way, Detective Kamei. If we assume that the defendants killed the victim, what do you think their motive might have been?"

"Yes, we also uncovered that. The motive appears to be money.

First, the defendant, Koji Nioka, is currently unemployed.

On the other hand, the victim, Akiyuki Ichinomiya, had life insurance worth about 200 thousand dollars. Not only that, but he also had the right to inherit his wife's estate following her recent death, and we've found that he owned quite a substantial amount of assets. The total assets, including the insurance money — now an inheritance — are known to exceed 650 thousand dollars.

Furthermore, the victim had legally adopted the defendant Mayu Nioka, who was his daughter-in-law. In other words, the only ones eligible to inherit all of his estate are the two defendants."

I never thought Koji Nioka's unemployment would come back to haunt us like this. He already looked like a bad guy, and on top of that, the word "unemployed" gave such a terrible impression. It was the truth, so there was no way to counter it.

But an inheritance of over 650 thousand dollars. If I remembered correctly, Shoko Ichinomiya, who recently committed suicide, also had life insurance. Considering the insurance money for both of them and the assets that allowed them to stay long-term at a hot spring inn, it was likely the total would indeed reach about 650 thousand dollars.

650 thousand dollars. That was enough to make someone consider murder. In these times when "recession" was a buzzword, it could certainly be a strong motive.

"Based on the above—" Detective Kamei began to conclude, "Given the timeline, the only people who could have administered alcohol and Halcion to the victim, made him unconscious, drowned him at sea, and then disposed of the body in Abuku Lake are the Nioka couple. Therefore, we requested an arrest warrant at 9:00 AM on the 11th and proceeded with the arrest."

"Thank you, that will be all."

Togasaki bowed deeply, thoroughly satisfied, and expressed his appreciation to Detective Kamei.

"Defense attorney Yamashika, please proceed with your cross-examination."

The judge spoke.

Well then — there was certainly room to challenge the testimony, but it was fair to say that there was little to no foothold to overturn this worst-case scenario. Of course, I intended to poke holes in the rushed investigation that led to the arrest after just one night, but it was still too early for that.

I barely had a choice; I'd just do what I could as usual.

"Detective Kamei. I have just one question for you. You investigated the hotel where my clients said they were resting, correct?"

"Yes."

"Naturally, this included the room the defendants were supposedly using, right?"

"Of course."

"And yet, you couldn't find any trace that my clients used that room?"

"That's correct."

"That's strange, isn't it? If they were in the room for three hours, you'd expect to find at least a single strand of hair."

"Yes, that's true. Which means that not finding even a single hair is the most conclusive evidence that they weren't in the hotel at all."

"Please refrain from making interpretations that suit your convenience.

Look, think about it the other way around. If the two of them had really used the room, it would be strange not to find even a single hair, wouldn't it?"

"Yes, well, that would be strange.

But we conducted a thorough investigation without cutting any corners. As a result, we found no hair at all. That's an undeniable fact. Therefore, we concluded that the two of them had no alibi from 4:00 PM to 7:00 PM."

"...That's all I have to ask."

It was odd. If they were in the hotel for three hours, there should have been some trace left behind. Something that could provide DNA evidence, like a strand of hair.

But the police said they didn't find anything. Why? Could it be that my clients really went to the hotel but didn't enter the room? No, they didn't seem to be lying, but...

"Your Esteemed Honor, with this—"

Togasaki puffed out his chest and declared,

"I would like to conclude the prosecution's case. I am confident that everyone now fully understands how the defendants killed the victim, the method they used, and the sequence of events. All that remains is for you to make a calm and rational judgment."

"Understood. Then let's move on to the defense's rebuttal.

However—"

The judge checked the time.

"It looks like we've reached the end of today's session. Thank you for your efforts. Defense counsel, please prepare for tomorrow's proceedings."

And so, the second day of the trial ended smoothly, with everything going as the prosecution intended.

◆

Afterward, I left Kageno to his investigation and drove alone to Abuku Lake.

The objective was singular: to confirm whether the small stone with sulfur attached to it, as mentioned, could be found in locations other than the west side of the lake.

After about a 45-minute drive from the courthouse, I arrived at the southwest side of the lake. From there, I first drove north along the road built on the west side of the lake.

As I approached the western edge of the lake, I came upon an open area just as Officer Kinoshita had testified.

To the left of the road was a dense, overgrown forest.

And to the right, the lakeshore was lined with small and large stones. There were no particular obstacles on the lakeshore that would prevent access, and it seemed quite possible to drive a car right up to the shore.

There were hardly any people around, just the occasional passing car, and as soon as I opened the car door, a strong smell of sulfur, like rotten eggs, immediately wafted in. In the middle of the lakeshore stood an old wooden sign that looked like it had been there for at least ten years. The sign had a warning that read, "Due to sulfur emissions in this area, staying for long periods may cause discomfort. Please do not enter."

Unfortunately, there was nothing else noteworthy to see.

Reluctantly, I got back in the car and headed toward the northeast side of the lake.

...But in the end, even after driving all the way to the northeast side of the lake, I found nothing that could serve as a clue to solving the case.

The only thing that caught my eye was that although Abuku Lake should have been a non-freezing lake due to the hot springs bubbling up, the northern part was covered with a thick layer of ice, perhaps due to the flow of the water.

However, I couldn't see how that could be related to the case.

<u>December 14th, 4:00 PM, Utakata Inn</u>

"Aaaaaahhhhhh..."

I let out a strange sound while sitting in the massage chair. There were a few other people around besides Kageno, but I didn't care about that. Making weird noises when sitting in a massage chair or when a fan blows wind in your face was just human instinct.

I couldn’t care less about the hot springs, but I was extremely grateful for facilities like this. They helped soothe the body after the exhaustion of the courtroom. If only Yukina were here, my heart would be soothed as well.

Anyway, I was able to get a good grasp of the prosecution's claims in today's court session.

When I first heard about this case on the news and later listened to the Nioka couple, I didn’t fully understand it, but now I had a clear picture of the case and the process that led to the arrest.

Now then—

"So, Kageno. It’s been two days since you started investigating; you’ve got enough material by now, right?"

"Yeah. I’ve looked into everything."

Kageno said, shaking in the massage chair just like me.

"So, what do you want to hear first?"

"Let’s start with the alibis of the people involved."

"Who do you want to start with? Although, there’s really only the innkeeper, the victim's real brother, and the attending physician."

"Then let’s start with Barcode Igarashi."

"...What a nickname. He’d be pissed if he heard that.

Anyway, about Igarashi... He’s got a perfect alibi. From 4:00 PM to around 9:00 PM on December 10th, several employees witnessed him constantly bustling around the inn. Well, he probably went to the bathroom at some point, and I can’t say for sure that he was in front of people every single second."

"Well, if he’s working at the inn, it’s only natural that he’d be busy during those hours. What about the others?"

"The brother and the attending physician — Tomoyasu Ichinomiya and Shozo Kasai — are in the same boat. After the previous trial ended on the 10th, both of them returned to the inn by 3:00 PM. The reception recorded it, so there’s no doubt about that. However, Kasai went out briefly around 4:30 PM, and Ichinomiya went out just before 5:00 PM. But both of them returned by around 5:15 PM."

"5:15 PM, huh..."

There was plenty of room to consider that the victim was killed around 5:00 PM. If that was the case, these two, who had no alibi at that time, seemed suspicious.

However, according to some forensic expert's testimony, the body, which the prosecution claimed was disposed of in the lake and later floated down the river, hadn't been dumped until at least 5:30 PM. If they were back at the inn by 5:15 PM, we couldn't accuse them of being the culprits.

There was a possibility they used some trick to delay the time when the body was discarded in the water. But we mustn't forget the autopsy result that concluded the victim was killed at sea.

It took at least an hour to get to the nearest sea from Abuku Town. Even considering the time it would take to drown the victim, it would still take at least two hours for a round trip, even at top speed. Given that Tomoyasu Ichinomiya and Shozo Kasai were both back at the inn by 3:00 PM and didn't go out again until 5:00 PM, it was unlikely they could be framed as suspects.

"Anyone else?"

I asked, and Kageno just shrugged in response.

"Nothing else. That's all the information."

"Damn. Nothing useful, huh."

"I never said there would be any good news."

"Well, fine. To be honest, I didn't think there were any other suspects, so I wasn't expecting much from the alibis."

"Oh. So you're considering the suicide theory, huh?"

"Yeah. I just can't believe my clients are lying. If that's the case, the possibility that he killed himself in despair after his wife's death is very real."

"Well, I can see where you're coming from. But listening to the prosecution, it doesn't seem like suicide at all."

"That's exactly the problem..."

At this point, the theory that seemed most appropriate to prove the Nioka couple's innocence was the suicide theory. There was no doubt about that.

The Nioka couple was summoned by Akiyuki Ichinomiya, who even left them a message hoping they would live happily together as a couple and asking for forgiveness if he couldn't leave them much. Just a few hours earlier, it had been revealed that his wife, whom they thought had been murdered, had actually committed suicide, and the cause of her death was my argument that Akiyuki Ichinomiya himself was to blame for neglecting his sick wife in favor of his hobby of raising fish. In despair, Akiyuki Ichinomiya took alcohol and Halcion to ease his suffering and drowned himself — that was a natural conclusion.

If I explained this to the jury, the suicide theory might just hold up.

But at the moment, there were two extremely troublesome issues with this theory.

The first was that the only people who heard the words hinting at suicide were the two defendants who were being accused of murder. This lacked persuasiveness, and in the first place, to present this to the jury, I'd have to put those two on the witness stand. And then that hyena Togasaki would come at them with who knew what kind of cross-examination — just thinking about it gave me chills.

And the other — this was the biggest problem — was the autopsy result indicating that the victim, Akiyuki Ichinomiya, was first drowned at sea and then dumped in a river in Abuku Town.

This completely contradicted the suicide theory. There was no way the jury would believe the claim, "The body that drowned at sea swam up the river like a salmon!"

So — after parting ways with the Nioka couple, Akiyuki Ichinomiya must have met someone else at the sea, was murdered, and then transported to Abuku Lake. But according to what Kageno told me, there was no one connected to the victim who could have done that within the given time frame. The only exception, it seemed, were my clients.

Summarizing the prosecution's case so far, it went like this:

On December 10th, at 4:00 PM, the murdered Akiyuki Ichinomiya and the Nioka couple were seen talking near the "Seaside Hill Park." There was a witness to this. The Nioka couple also admitted it, so there was no doubt about it.

Then, according to the prosecution, at this time, the Nioka couple gave Akiyuki Ichinomiya alcohol — beer — and Halcion, a sleeping pill, and drowned him at sea.

The autopsy results seemed to confirm the presence of alcohol and Halcion, leaving no room for doubt. The Nioka couple also admitted that Akiyuki Ichinomiya was drinking beer. On top of that, there was the fact that Koji Nioka had been prescribed Halcion just a few days earlier to help with sleep deprivation.

So, after drowning Akiyuki Ichinomiya at sea, the Nioka couple headed to a nearby love hotel to create an alibi. There, they made sure to get themselves on the security cameras. They probably even rented a room just to avoid suspicion.

Next, they headed to Abuku Lake. More precisely, to the deserted spot on the west side of the lake where sulfur was known to be spewing out. There, they disposed of the body. The body then drifted down the river flowing out of the lake and was eventually found caught on a bridge along the way.

After that, the two returned to the hotel for the final touch, getting themselves on the security cameras again.

The reason they went all the way to Abuku Lake to dispose of the body was, of course, to create a diversion. They likely thought that if the body was found at Abuku Lake, which was nearly an hour's drive away, they wouldn't be suspected. On top of that, Koji Nioka had just been acquitted earlier that same day in another trial. No one would think that on such a day, he would commit another murder.

However, two major miscalculations occurred.

One was that small stones with sulfur attached to them got stuck in the tire of the Nioka couple's car.

The other was that the autopsy revealed Akiyuki Ichinomiya had drowned not in the lake, but in the sea.

Especially the latter miscalculation was significant. This, on the contrary, strengthened the suspicion that the Nioka couple, who had been near the sea, were the culprits.

...Right, when I reviewed the prosecution's claim like this, it was quite solid. I could even understand the police's confidence in arresting Koji Nioka for another murder the day after he was acquitted.

However, it wasn't like there was no way to break through this situation. Though, it would involve proceeding based purely on speculation without any concrete evidence...

"Kageno, there are two things I want you to investigate."

"What are they?"

"First, it's about Halcion. From what I can tell, Akiyuki Ichinomiya, who was killed, was probably also prescribed Halcion. I want you to look into that."

"I see, indeed, if his wife had died, it wouldn't be strange for the husband to be suffering from sleep deprivation as well. Got it, I'll check it out."

If it turned out that Akiyuki Ichinomiya also had Halcion, it would support the suicide theory, and we could even argue that another perpetrator stole it from him.

"And the other thing?"

"You remember that officer, Kinoshita? That middle-aged guy?"

"Oh yeah, the one who cracked that lame dad joke?"

"We need to do something about those small stones he submitted. See if we can discredit that part."

"Discredit that part, huh? Are you talking about the small stones or the officer himself?"

"The officer himself."

"Got it. If you're willing to spend some money, I might be able to dig up some dirt on the police."

"Then do it. At this point, anything will help."

"Alright, I'll see what I can do."

Now, I'd leave the small stone issue to Kageno — the problem was the autopsy result that concluded the victim was killed at sea and then disposed of in the river.

If we could just disprove that, we could push the suicide theory, or even frame someone like Tomoyasu Ichinomiya as the culprit.

But — as for that forensic pathologist, Honjo or whatever his name was, even I, a layman, found his testimony convincing. He explained that when someone drowns at sea, plankton that only lived in the sea remained in the liver and kidneys. This was a biological reaction, and it wasn't something that happened after death, even if the body was submerged in seawater...

There was no way to refute that.

"...Wait a minute."

Yeah, sure, I had no chance in a battle of knowledge about corpses against a forensic pathologist.

However, come to think of it, didn't I just recently reunite with a certain expert on corpses?

His name was Kudoku Ujigami. His profession was a medical examiner, and when it came to handling corpses, he was second to none, not even to a run-of-the-mill forensic pathologist.

Acting quickly as soon as I had the idea, I took out my cell phone and directly called Ujigami's house. Although I knew his cell phone number, I purposely didn't call it. I didn't think he'd easily lend me a hand, and there was the saying, "If you would shoot a general, shoot his horse first."

As the phone rang, I prayed that Ujigami himself wasn't home.

"Hello, this is Ujigami."

Soon, I heard a familiar, beautiful voice.

Good. It was his wife, Iori Ujigami. She was a woman so pure and beautiful, both physically and mentally, that it was almost puzzling why she had taken on the Ujigami surname.

"Hello, this is Yamashika."

"Oh, Mr. Yamashika. Thank you for all your help the other day."

"No, thank you. Is your husband home?"

"Oh... He hasn't come back yet. I think he'll be home in about two hours."

"Ah, I see. That's a bit of a problem..."

While inwardly pumping my fist in triumph, I outwardly pretended to be deeply troubled.

"What's the matter? I can relay the message for you."

"Well, the truth is, I'm currently defending a murder case."

"Oh, that's right. I saw it on TV."

"And to solve this case, I really need your husband's help as a medical examiner."

I spoke as urgently as possible.

The effect was immediate.

"...You need my husband's help?"

"Yes, I absolutely do."

"Alright, I'll have him call you back as soon as he gets home."

"That would be a great help. Thank you, and goodbye."

I smiled to myself as I hung up the phone.

"I never thought you'd ask him for help."

Kageno said.

"Hmph, I'm not a kid. I'll use whatever I can. I'll put our past quarrels behind me. Besides, now he's got a wife and kid — his weaknesses."

"...Well, do as you like."

Kageno seemed to remember something as he stood up from the massage chair, and he turned back to me.

"Oh, that's right. Speaking of couples, I also looked into the love hotel where the Nioka couple supposedly took a break."

"Oh? Did you find anything that could serve as an alibi?"

"Well, not really. Since it was just a three-hour stay, they didn't need to fill out the guestbook, and the system is designed so that guests and staff don't have to meet face-to-face. They might have passed by another guest, but given the nature of the place, I doubt anyone would remember them."

"I understand that. But surely they must have left at least a hair or two in the room. Actually, it would be more suspicious if they didn't."

"I've got an answer that'll satisfy you on that front."

"What do you mean?"

"It's simple, really. Given the nature of the place, if even a single hair is left behind, it tends to kill the mood for the next guest."

...Kageno's explanation was enough to make me chuckle.

Indeed, in a way, it was quite logical. Indeed, if there were hairs in the bed that weren't yours, it would be off-putting.

"So, that hotel prides itself on cleanliness?"

"Exactly. They thoroughly clean everything, from the sheets to the drainage pipes, after every guest leaves."

"Hmm."

I see, that explains why there were no traces left in the hotel room by my clients. An unexpectedly tricky pitfall.

"So, Kageno, is there any way to prove that at least the couple was in the room?"

"Yeah, rejoice. I've got a fun little nugget of information that might help with that."

Kageno grinned mischievously.

"I got this from one of the hotel staff... though it might not be something you'd want to bring up in court."

"Don't tell me there was a hidden camera recording them or something?"

"Don't be ridiculous... Well, actually, that's not entirely out of the question, but there's no way a staff member would spill that. No, the nugget I'm talking about is something else.

Didn't the couple head straight to the hotel as soon as the trial was over?"

"Yeah."

"And the husband was wearing a suit, right?"

"Yeah. They were in court until that afternoon."

"And when someone's arrested, the police take custody of the clothes they were wearing, right?"

"Yeah, that's right. If he was wearing a suit, he would have had to hand it over when he was put into detention. But it should have been returned when he was released... No, but this is a murder case, so if it's the clothes he was wearing at the time of the murder, the police might still have them."

"Can we examine those clothes if needed?"

"Well, if you file a request saying they're needed as evidence, I'm sure we can manage it."

"Then file the request. It might just help with the alibi."

"...There you go again with your roundabout expressions. Just say it straight — what do you want to examine on the clothes? Don't tell me you're going to ask to examine the skirt his wife was wearing?"

I remembered that there was some talk like that a few years ago during the scandal involving that president, something called 'Clickinton' or whatever.

Apparently, bodily fluids on clothes didn't come out even after washing. Sure, that could serve as proof they were doing something at the hotel, but if it didn't come out even after washing, then you couldn't prove when it got there. More importantly, proving something so indecent in court... Well, it might get some laughs, but as a lawyer who prided himself on decorum, I'd prefer to avoid it.

But, my guess was off.

"We're going to examine the husband's clothes — specifically, the slacks."

...After hearing the detailed explanation from Kageno, I was more convinced than ever — more so than by any trivia I'd picked up in this trial.

◆

It was an hour later when I received a call from Ujigami — just as I was back in my room waiting for dinner.

"...Yamashika."

Ujigami's first words were filled with intense resentment.

"Oh, my dear friend, my senior Ujigami! I've been expecting you."

"Don't mess with me. What the hell did you tell my wife? I don't know what you said, but when I got home, somehow I was already committed to coming to see you. Saori even had the Shinkansen timetable ready and was waiting for me."

"All I said was that I really needed your help."

"...You should have told me directly if that's the case. I gave you my cellphone number, didn't I?"

"If I'd asked you directly, you would've definitely refused."

"That doesn't mean you should go telling my wife! You know what she's like!"

Honestly, the best way to describe Kudoku Ujigami's personality was that he was a man impossible to deal with. He was the kind of guy who would throw gasoline on a fire just because it was there. If I told him I needed help, he'd probably just laugh and say, 'Serves you right.'

But, his wife was different. She had a personality completely at odds with the Ujigami surname, always willing to lend a hand to someone in need. It would've been foolish not to take advantage of that.

"Well, anyway, there's no time to waste. Just come over here. I'll cover your travel expenses."

"Like hell I will! I've got my own schedule to keep!"

"Oh, my senior Ujigami, are you sure you want to say that?"

"Of course! I don't have to take orders from you!"

I deployed my secret weapon, reserved for dealing with Ujigami.

"I'll tell your wife on you."

"I'll kill you one day."

Ujigami spat out words unbecoming of a doctor, but in the end, he didn't outright refuse.

"...Fine, I'll come.

But how am I supposed to get there now? I'm tired, and I'm not about to drive on the highway in the middle of the night. Unlike you, I've got a family to take care of."

"Tch, fine, I get it."

I couldn't push him that far.

Come to think of it, the town of Abuku where I was now closed off the surrounding roads at night.

"Alright, then come tomorrow afternoon... No, that won't work, I've got a hearing in the morning. Just come to the courthouse in the afternoon. The Shinkansen should run to the city, right?"

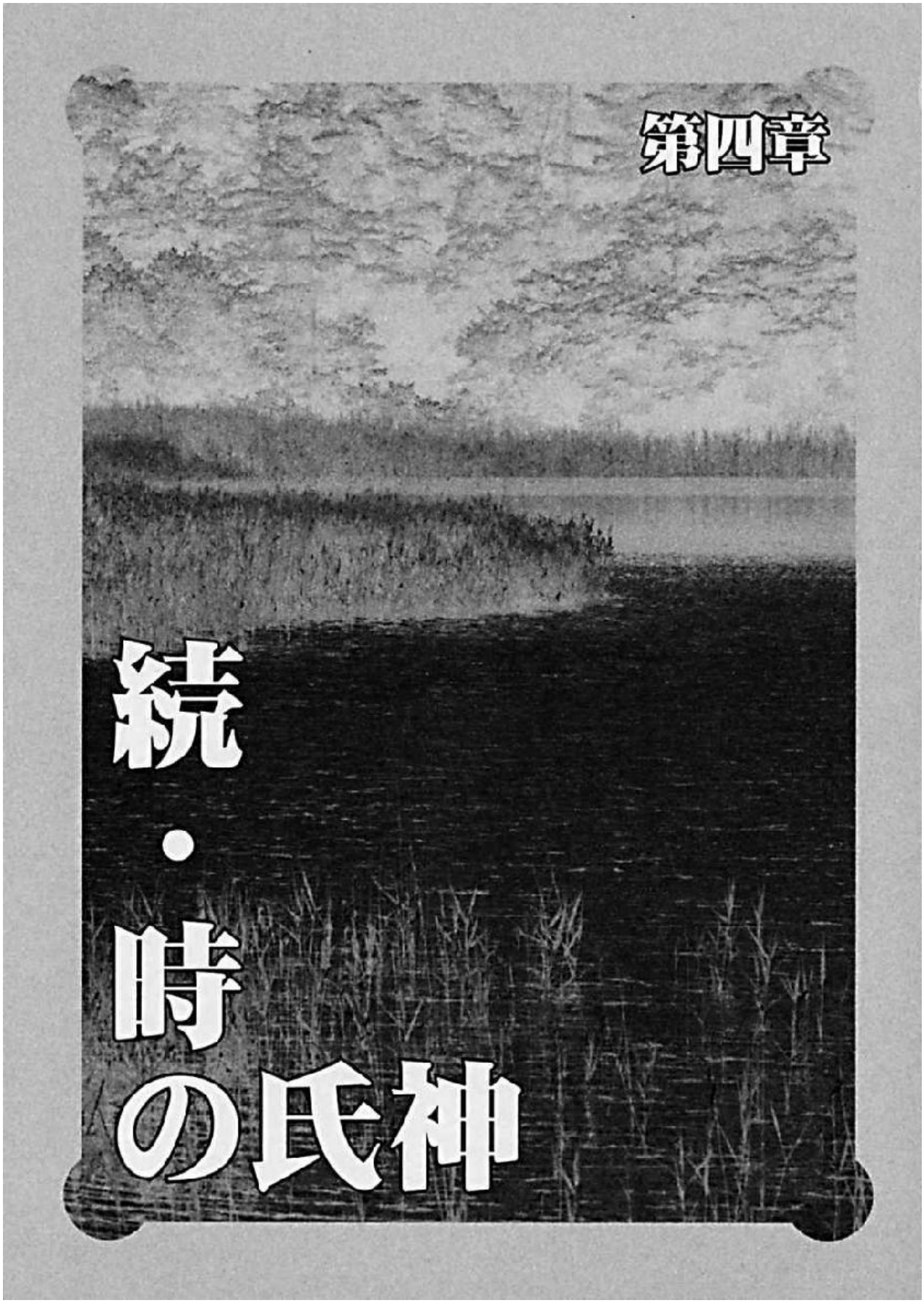
"I'd love to refuse, but I guess I have no choice. But remember this, Yamashika — this is a favor I'm doing for you."

"Yeah, put it on my tab. When you go through a divorce and need a lawyer, I'll represent you for free."

"Who the hell's getting divorced?!"

With that angry shout, the line went dead.

Maybe I pushed him too far. But I never imagined I'd be able to manipulate that self-serving Ujigami so easily. The saying 'marriage is the graveyard of life' seems to be spot on after all.


第四章
続・時の氏神

Chapter 4: Ujigami’s Time (Cont.)

December 15th, 10:00 AM, District Courtroom Number 1

"The defense’s first witness is Mr. Jun Hamamoto."

With my declaration, the defense's rebuttal began.

The person I called to the witness stand was a young man. He was about the same age as Koji Nioka. If I had to point out a distinctive feature, it would be the ring he was wearing on his ring finger. Seriously, my client, Ujigami, and now this witness — why were all the people involved in this case wearing rings?

"Could you please state your occupation and name?"

"My name is Jun Hamamoto. I work at a hotel."

"The hotel is called 'Lovers,' correct?"

"Yes."

"By the way, how much do you know about the case being deliberated here?"

"Well, just what I’ve seen on TV and read in the newspapers."

"That’s sufficient. Now, are you aware that the victim’s body was found in the river around 6 PM on December 10th, and it’s estimated that the body was dumped into the water within half an hour before that?"

"Um, I just learned that now."

"That’s more than enough.

Now, are you aware that the defendants claim they were resting at the hotel where you work between 4 PM and 7 PM on that same day?"

"Yes, I’ve heard about that to some extent from the police."

"But there was no evidence that could prove the defendants were at your hotel at that time, correct?"

"Yes. At our hotel, we have a system where the staff doesn’t have to meet the guests face-to-face."

"Still, isn’t it possible that, for example, a single strand of hair might have been left in the room?"

"Hmm, well, at our hotel, we take special care to ensure that doesn’t happen. Cleanliness is our top priority.

I think you can understand the reason. Well, in a hotel like ours, if even a single strand of an unknown person’s hair is left behind, many customers would find it extremely unpleasant."

There were chuckles throughout the courtroom.

"That’s why, after a guest uses a room, we make sure to clean it thoroughly so that not even a single hair or drop of sweat is left behind. When you stay at a hotel, please consider ‘Lovers.’"

There were more chuckles.

If I ever killed Togasaki, I’d do it in a hotel that prided itself on cleanliness. If they cleaned up all the traces for me, nothing could be easier. The only problem would be how to lure Togasaki into such a hotel...

"Well then, let me ask you something unrelated. At the hotel where you work, you frequently change the sheets, right?"

"Yes. As I said, cleanliness is our top priority. If there’s even a little dirt, the guests can’t relax and enjoy their stay."

Honestly, I was ready for him to stop bringing up that kind of topic. It might be entertaining for the audience, but I was starting to get nervous seeing the judge’s temple twitch.

"What do you do with the sheets? Do you wash them?"

"Yes. We have a specialized service that collects and cleans them for us."

"So, in other words, even after the room is cleaned, the sheets remain for a while, correct?"

"Yes, more or less."

"But the police didn’t take the sheets to examine them, correct?"

"Yes. Unfortunately, the timing was bad, and we had already handed everything over to the service before the police arrived."

"So, crucial evidence was lost due to the police's delay in their investigation?"

"Objection!"

Togasaki stood up forcefully.

"The defense's question just now was maliciously intended to discredit the police, and this witness, being just an employee, isn't in a position to answer such a question.

Furthermore, I must add that the series of questions the defense has been asking clearly undermines the dignity of this court and doesn't seem to have any relevance to this case."

It was definitely a talent to be able to string together so many lines just to raise an objection. Well, Togasaki did look like someone with obsessive-compulsive tendencies, so I supposed he didn't appreciate these less-than-refined exchanges.

"In accordance with the prosecution's objection—"

I shrugged and said,

"I will withdraw the previous question. However, I'm not asking these questions without reason. Please allow me to continue for a little longer."

"...Very well. Continue."

The judge granted permission, though Togasaki, still dissatisfied, slowly returned to his seat with his face as stiff as concrete.

"Then I'll continue the questioning. Mr. Hamamoto, you're married, aren't you?"

"Yes, I am."

"Alright, hypothetically speaking, if you were to have an affair at a hotel like the one you work at, what would you be careful about?"

"Your Esteemed Honor!"

Togasaki glared at the judge. His eyes seemed to be pleading, 'Please, Your Esteemed Honor, use that gavel to deliver justice to this vulgar defense attorney!' Not that it mattered, but it was odd to ask someone to hit with a gavel like it was a full-fledged hammer.

The judge, looking a bit exasperated, said,

"Defense attorney, is this question necessary?"

"Yes, it's an extremely important question."

"Very well, but let this be the last time you ask such a question."

"Thank you. Now, Mr. Hamamoto, please answer."

"Well, hypothetically speaking, if I were to have an affair, there's one thing I'd be careful about.

As I mentioned earlier, at our hotel, cleanliness is our top priority, and the sheets are always replaced with freshly starched ones.

But this starch is the tricky part.

Well, you see, in a hotel like ours, if a man uses the bed, he might take a position where his knees are on the bed while still wearing his pants. Especially when he's in a hurry. I think everyone here can relate."

Indeed.

Every man in the courtroom, including the judge, seemed to nod in agreement. There were times when you couldn't even wait to take a shower.

What surprised me was that even Togasaki, who had been scowling just moments ago, was now keeping his mouth shut and not protesting. Perhaps he was starting to get a little interested.

Hamamoto continued with his enlightening explanation.

"When this happens, if you repeatedly rub your knees against the sheets, the starch from the sheets can transfer to the knees of your pants. This can make the knee area look shiny, as if it's been oiled.

If your wife knows about this, and she notices such marks on your pants... Well, it would be terrifying to think what might happen, wouldn't it?"

The courtroom was filled with laughter. Honestly, just like the talk about plankton the other day, trials were treasure troves of trivial knowledge.

"So, Mr. Hamamoto, if the defendant had used the hotel, it's possible that such traces might remain, correct?"

"Yes, that's right."

For the first time since the trial began today, Togasaki furrowed his brows.

I turned to face Togasaki,

"Prosecutor Togasaki. Last night, I requested that the clothing Koji Nioka was wearing at the time of his arrest be brought here, didn't I?"

"...Very well, do as you please."

Togasaki brusquely gave a nod to the assistant prosecutor sitting next to him. Soon, a set of clothes wrapped in a plastic bag was brought to me.

I found the slacks among them and handed them to Hamamoto on the witness stand.

"Mr. Hamamoto, could you please examine the knee area of these slacks?"

Hamamoto immediately did as I asked and found what he was looking for.

"Ah, there it is. The starch has stuck to the knees, making them shiny."

"Could you please hold them up so that the jurors and the audience can see?"

Hamamoto held up the slacks as instructed, showing the knee area, and did a full turn on the witness stand.

In the courtroom's lighting, it was clear that the knee area was indeed shining.

"Mr. Hamamoto, do you think this proves that the defendants were at least in the hotel room?"

"Well, yes, I think so. Only a hotel would use such starched sheets. Since these marks can be washed off, it must mean they were made quite recently."

"No further questions. The floor is yours for cross-examination."

I looked at Togasaki with satisfaction. This should have at least planted the idea that my client might have an alibi.

Togasaki stood up, as expressionless as ever. It was easy to predict how he would cross-examine, so there was no need to be on guard.

"Mr. Hamamoto, it's possible that the starch found on the defendant's slacks came from using a hotel bed.

But, Mr. Hamamoto, can you determine when exactly that starch was transferred?"

"N-No, that's beyond my ability."

"So, for example, it’s possible that the defendants entered the room, got the starch on their slacks, and then left the room after about five minutes, correct?"

"Well… Since I don’t know when the marks were made, yes, that’s possible. Though you have to pay to enter the room, within the designated time, there are no checks on going out."

"No further questions."

It was a textbook cross-examination. But it was weak. Even Togasaki, it seems, wasn’t comfortable with this kind of dirty back-and-forth.

"I’d like to conduct a redirect examination."

I stood up and promptly fired off a question.

"Mr. Hamamoto, hypothetically, if you and your spouse entered a hotel room to rest, would you be satisfied after just five minutes?"

The courtroom erupted in laughter.

"Objection, Your Esteemed Honor! The defense is asking inflammatory questions without meaning, and is trying to divert the argument!"

For once, Togasaki shouted emotionally. He must not be used to being mocked like this.

I suppose even Togasaki, being a man, couldn’t bring himself to argue, “Isn’t it possible they left the hotel without doing anything?”

"No further questions."

"Any recross?"

"No, that’s all."

"Then, defense, please call your next witness."

Now, I was in a bit of a bind. I checked my wristwatch. I had only called one witness so far, so of course, it wasn’t even 11:00 yet.

"Your Honor, the truth is I need the opinion of a specialist for this case.

A friend from my hometown is on his way here, and he should be arriving soon.

So, although it’s a bit early, could we take a short lunch break?"

"Your Esteemed Honor, may I respectfully say—"

'Quiet down, Hyena Prosecutor' — my inner voice didn’t reach him.

"As far as I know, Defense Attorney Yamashika always requests a temporary adjournment when it comes time for the defense’s rebuttal.

It’s one thing if it’s just us, but postponing the trial will also add to the burden on the jurors. While it’s understandable if there’s an unavoidable reason, if this happens in every trial, I must question the defense’s understanding of the trial process."

"Prosecutor Togasaki, I can understand your point."

The judge said.

"However, considering that Defense Attorney Yamashika has consistently provided solid rebuttals in all his trials after such postponements, we must take that into account. Moreover, in this case, the police conducted an unusually swift investigation. Given that, if the defense requests time, it should be granted."

"If Your Esteemed Honor says so, then I have no choice."

Togasaki backed down surprisingly quickly, considering how much he had fussed.

As the judge said, given the speed of the investigation and preliminary hearings, it was only natural to grant the defense some extra time. After all, in criminal trials, the principle was that the defense should be given every possible convenience. Even that Hyena Prosecutor should understand that much.

In short, he just wanted to tarnish my image in front of the jury.

"Defense Attorney Yamashika, you’re going to meet with that specialist now, correct?"

"Yes, that’s right."

"Then an hour-long recess won’t be enough. But keeping the jurors waiting for several hours isn’t an option either.

It’s Sunday, so though it’s a bit early, I suggest we adjourn for the day."

"That would be ideal."

"Very well. We'll reconvene tomorrow morning at 9:00 AM. Thank you, everyone."

The gavel struck with a sharp crack.

I had to admit, the jurors' gazes toward me were a bit colder than before.

But that was fine. No matter how coldly they looked at me during the trial, all that mattered was overturning things in the end.

...Well, if I didn't get any useful information from Ujigami, it'd be a huge embarrassment.

After parting ways with Kageno, who was handling the investigation, I headed to the city's station where Ujigami was supposed to arrive.

It was somewhat surprising, but Ujigami was waiting in front of the station, not late for once.

He was noticeably taller than the people walking around him. Although he tried to camouflage his sharp eyes with glasses, his irritated expression as he scanned the surroundings rendered that effort pointless. The station was crowded, but no one dared to come within a meter of Ujigami, which was somewhat amusing.

"Hey Ujigami, you actually showed up. I didn't expect you to come on time and so smoothly."

"Shut up. You drag me all the way out here, and that's your first greeting?"

As expected, he was in an even worse mood than he looked.

If this had been the Ujigami from three years ago, even I would have been more careful in my approach. But now, this guy had a weakness — a wife and a kid. If he didn't cooperate, I could always tattle to his wife — knowing that, I wasn't scared at all.

I took Ujigami to a nearby family restaurant.

I only ordered tea, but as usual, Ujigami ordered four servings of the recommended hamburger lunch, startling the waitress.

"Yamashika, you're paying the bill, right?"

"I know. I'll cover it."

"Damn, at least show a little gratitude. If anyone found out that I came all the way here to help a traitorous bastard like you, I could lose my job."

"Who's a traitor?"

"Who's always defying the prosecutors, the nation's representatives?"

Indeed. It was true that prosecutors were, technically, representatives of the state.

"Don't worry. If you ever get fired for that, I'll represent you and sue for wrongful dismissal. Besides, aren't you a public servant? Even I pay taxes, so no one can complain if I help out the guy who gets paid by the government."

"In these past few years, you've become quite the smooth talker.

Alright, enough of that. I want to get back to my beloved family as soon as possible, so let's get down to business."

"Sure, let's do that.

In this trial, the forensic analysis results might decide everything. I need your opinion."

I began by summarizing the details of the case.

The body of Akiyuki Ichinomiya was discovered on the 10th of this month around 6 PM. The forensic autopsy revealed that the victim had consumed alcohol and Halcion, and it was suspected that after drowning in the sea, the body was disposed of in Abuku Lake. As a result, suspicion fell on the Nioka couple, who were the only ones near the sea and had a motive to kill the victim. Furthermore, several pieces of circumstantial evidence that suggested they were involved in the crime were found, leading to their arrest and indictment.

"What's really troublesome is the story that, although the victim was killed at sea, the body was found in a river. This has only strengthened the suspicion against my client and made it impossible to argue either a suicide or a homicide theory."

"I see, I get the general idea. So, first, let me ask, what's the basis for the theory that the victim was killed at sea?"

"Oh, according to the testimony of the forensic pathologist who performed the autopsy, they detected some kind of plankton that only exists in the sea in the victim's kidneys or liver. What was it called again...? Something like 'Cosinodesks species' or whatever..."

Ujigami blinked in surprise.

"...'Cosinodesks species'? What the hell is that?"

"Maybe I got that wrong. 'Osugidesks'... No, that's not it either. It's the name of some plankton."

"Could it be you're talking about the 'Coscinodiscus' species?"

“Oh, yeah, that sounds familiar.”

“...I can’t figure out where you got ‘Osugi’ from, though.”

“Leave it alone. Anyway, what is this ‘Coscinodiscus’ species? I mean, the name is long and all, but what’s this ‘species’ thing?”

“There are tons of different kinds of microorganisms like plankton. The ‘Coscinodiscus’ species refers to a major plankton found in oceans all over the world. But their shape differs slightly depending on the habitat. It’s a hassle to name and manage each one individually, so they just lump them together under the ‘species’ name.”

“...When you explain it, it sounds strangely casual. Is that really true?”

“You’re being suspicious. What would I gain from telling you lies? I don’t lie unless there’s something in it for me.”

He had a point. Even if what he just said were complete nonsense, it wouldn’t be a big problem. Incidentally, my motto was, “I bluff and exaggerate, but I don’t lie.” Not that it mattered.

“Fine, let’s get back on topic, Ujigami. Is there any way to overturn the theory that the victim died at sea? If I can do that, I could even fabricate a suicide theory.”

“...Overturning and fabricating, you sure don’t sound like a lawyer.”

“The point is to win, that’s all that matters. In this line of work, as long as you get results, no one cares about the methods.”

“...Do you even know what the word ‘morality’ means?”

“‘The winner is always right,’ that’s what it means, right? The truth doesn’t matter; what I need right now is a way to turn the situation around.”

Ujigami sighed in resignation.

“Fine, I’ll finish my business and head back. Do what you want after that.

However — based on what I’ve heard, it seems the forensic pathologist who conducted the autopsy wasn’t wrong.”

“That's where you come in.”

“Look, even if you say that...”

Just then, the waitress arrived with our order, requiring two people to carry it, so the conversation was temporarily interrupted.

The sight of the four identical dishes filling the table was enough to kill anyone's appetite. If you're going to order four servings, at least choose different dishes.

Without even saying "thank you for the meal," Ujigami grabbed a knife and fork and immediately began eating with gusto.

"Oh yeah, it might be helpful, so tell me more about the victim. I heard he was old, but what kind of work did he do in the past?"

Ujigami asked between bites. I was wearing my best suit, so I was worried something strange might fly out of his mouth.

"About his background, huh. His age... If I remember correctly, he was seventy-three. He was a company employee until he retired."

"Damn, it would've been interesting if he had been a fisherman. Anything else?"

"...I've already told you his age and occupation. What else is there to say?"

"What about his medical history, his health?"

"For his age, he was generally in good health. Oh, but he did have a bit of asthma recently. I remember him coughing when he testified in court the other day."

"Hmm. Asthma, huh."

Ujigami's glasses seemed to flash.

"Just to be sure, that Akiyuki Ichinomiya, the man who was killed, didn't have a hobby of making pottery or charcoal grills, did he?"

"...What? Pottery and charcoal grills?"

"A charcoal grill, you know. The kind you use to start a fire with charcoal."

"No, I've never heard of such a hobby. And what does that have to do with plankton?"

"Don't worry about it. I didn't really expect that anyway."

“You’re talking nonsense again. I’ve never heard of anyone with a hobby of making charcoal grills. The victim’s hobby was keeping fish.”

“...Uh.”

Ujigami paused, his fork suspended in mid-air.

“He kept fish? What kind of fish? Were they by any chance sea fish?”

“Yeah, that’s right. Apparently, he had some money to burn, so he rented a room at that Utakata inn and set up an aquarium.”

“...Well, that’s interesting. Yamashika, to get back to the point, the place where the victim drowned was just said to be the sea; it wasn’t specifically identified as any particular inlet, right?”

“Oh, yeah. Now that you mention it, that’s right.”

Suddenly, Ujigami grinned. It was the kind of grin Kageno wore when he came up with some devious plan.

“Rejoice, Yamashika. This might just be the kind of argument you’d like.”

“Let’s hear it.”

...The moment I finished listening to Ujigami’s explanation, I had to struggle to suppress the laughter bubbling up inside me.

What this quack doctor had just said could serve as a strong foundation to overturn the claim that the victim died at sea. If this worked, it would provide a solid basis to convince the jury that suicide was a possibility.

The path was now clear. But... this alone wouldn’t be enough to resolve the case.

Based on what I just heard from Ujigami, the theory closest to the truth still seemed to be suicide.

However, the only way to argue that was to put the defendants on the stand and have them testify about their conversation by the sea. I personally knew the two defendants. That was why I believed what they were saying was true, and it was why I could believe in the possibility of a suicide theory.

But that was just me. The jurors wouldn’t see it that way. Even if Nioka and his wife testified about their conversation by the sea, the jurors would likely interpret it as a concocted story to

clear their names. Of course, Togasaki would undoubtedly focus on that during cross-examination.

If I argued what I had just learned from Ujigami, it would improve our current unfavorable situation — in other words, it would create more reasonable doubt. But that alone wasn't enough. If I was going to argue for the suicide theory, I'd have to deliver a closing argument, and to snatch victory from Togasaki, who looked like he was a skilled orator, I still needed something more.

I'd even consider framing someone else as the real culprit if I could... but I didn't have enough material to do that yet.

"By the way — " Ujigami said suddenly, interrupting my thoughts. "Since you called me here, I assume you've got photos of the body?"

It was impressive that he had already finished two of the daily lunch specials.

"Yeah, I have them. Here."

I handed over an envelope containing the kind of photos you should never look at while eating, photos I had swiped from the prosecutor's office.

But Ujigami, while bringing a thick chunk of ground meat to his mouth, casually flipped through the photos with a completely normal expression, as if he was about to whistle. This guy must have taken his current job because he enjoyed looking at dead bodies.

"I heard it was a drowning, but judging from these photos, it doesn't seem like more than two hours could have passed since the body was thrown into the water. At most, maybe ninety minutes."

...Just by glancing at the photos, he was able to reach the same conclusion as that forensic pathologist named Honjo. I had to give him credit for that.

"Did you notice anything else?"

"Well, don't rush me. I'm taking a good look now... Hm?"

At that moment, Ujigami's eyes stopped on one of the photos.

"Oh, did you find something?"

I asked eagerly, but Ujigami quickly seemed to lose interest in the photo.

"No, it was found near the lake, right? At this time of year, it wouldn’t be strange if there was some ice floating around. But it’s probably unrelated."

"Hey, wait a minute. Now I’m curious because of the way you said that. And besides, Abuku Lake is almost a non-freezing lake because of the hot springs that flow into it."

Though there were some parts that were frozen.

"Yeah, now that you mention it, I think I read something like that in a guidebook."

With the fork still in his mouth, Ujigami stared at the photo. I had the sudden urge to push that fork a little further in.

"Yamashika, take a look at this. Do you notice anything?"

The photo Ujigami pointed to showed the victim with both hands placed on their chest, almost as if in prayer. It was a close-up shot centered on those hands. It seemed to be taken specifically to capture the area beneath the victim's hands.

Why would someone go out of their way to take a close-up of that spot? And why was Ujigami interested in this photo? The answer became clear immediately.

Underneath the victim's hands.

"It looks like this part here is more swollen than the rest. Just slightly, though."

Considering the entire body had been submerged in water for over an hour, the skin was generally bloated. But even so, the area beneath the hands appeared to be slightly more swollen.

Ujigami nodded.

"Yeah, that's how it looks to me too. This is a water blister."

"A water blister? Now that you mention it, it does look like that. But wouldn’t that be expected since the body was in the water?"

"No, water blisters don’t form just because a body is submerged in water."

"...Now that you say it, that makes sense. So how did this blister form?"

"Well, there are several causes for water blisters... Burns can cause them, and so can skin diseases. But... judging from the photos, there don’t seem to be any on other parts of the body,

so it’s not a skin disease. And burns on a drowning victim would be strange, right? I thought frostbite might be a possibility..."

"Frostbite? I don’t really get it, but can you get that from being submerged in cold water?"

"That’s a good question. Frostbite is a condition where the skin’s blood circulation deteriorates due to extreme cold, causing tissue damage. But no matter how cold the water is, just being submerged in it wouldn’t cause freezing, right? At most, you’d get some redness or swelling. For frostbite severe enough to cause blisters, the conditions would have to be much worse..."

"Worse conditions, huh. So that’s why you thought the lake might have been frozen over? If the skin had direct contact with ice, it could end up like this?"

"Yeah, something like that."

Hmm. A water blister, possibly from frostbite, that only formed under the hands. Why did frostbite occur like that? And why only under the hands? Especially in a non-freezing lake like Abuku Lake, where ice was almost nonexistent.

"...Ah."

That was when it happened.

I felt as though the golden neurons in my brain lit up with a sudden flash.

The theory that the body was disposed of in the lake after drowning in the sea. The frostbite under the victim's hands. And the non-freezing lake.

If my hunch was right, then maybe—

"What’s up? Did something come to mind?"

"Yeah, I’ve figured it out. The truth."

I pulled out my cell phone and called Koji Nioka first. After a few rings, he answered.

"Yes, this is Nioka."

"It’s me. I need to confirm something. You said Shoko Ichinomiya had life insurance, right?"

"Yes, that’s what I’ve heard."

"Has it been paid out yet?"

"What? No, we've been dealing with all the complications since my mother-in-law passed away, so we haven't gotten around to that."

Well, that makes sense.

"I need precise details about that insurance. Can you tell me exactly which company and what type of life insurance she had? And also, the exact timing of when they took out the policy?"

"Uh, sure. I'll look into it and get back to you."

"Please do."

Not even five minutes later, Nioka called back.

The Ichinomiya couple had indeed taken out life insurance when they got married — six years ago. However, about a year ago, to be precise, ten months ago, the policy had reached its term, and they had switched to a new policy designed for healthy seniors.

I couldn't suppress the grin spreading across my face. Just as I'd suspected. Now I could flush out the real culprit. If things went as I planned, I'd be able to make that bastard Togasaki eat his words.

Next, I called Kageno on his cell phone.

"Hey, Kageno."

"...What is it? When you call me like that, it usually means more work for me."

"Glad you catch on quickly. Anyway, what's the status on the Kinoshita investigation?"

"It looks like we might've found some dirt. Probably the kind you'd like. We're about to conduct a background check... but it's likely a done deal."

"Good, that's what I wanted to hear."

Given how excited Officer Kinoshita was, I figured something was up, and it turns out there was.

"Keep working on that. But I've got another favor to ask."

"Yeah, yeah. What is it this time?"

"You call yourself a detective, even if only in name, so you can at least tail someone, right?"

"Sure, I can manage that. But whether or not I succeed depends on the situation. If there are too many people around, even the best tailing expert might lose the target, and if it's a deserted area, there's a chance the target might notice they're being followed. And if the target's a woman, I could lose them the moment they enter a women's restroom."

"I'm sure you could walk right into a women's restroom. Don't worry, I'll make sure to laugh if you get caught."

"Walk in? No way! At least promise you'll defend me if I get caught!"

"Oh? So, if I promise to defend you, you'd walk into a women's restroom?"

"...You know, you really should work on your attitude if you expect me to do you a favor."

"Just joking. So, can you tail someone or not?"

Kageno sighed.

"I can do it. But I don't know who I'm supposed to tail. If you want it done perfectly, I'd need about three more people."

"More people, huh? Well, if it's necessary, you can hire them. But the target will likely be driving, not walking. I also have a rough idea of where they'll start and where they're headed. How does that sound?"

"You should've mentioned that first. If that's the case, I can probably handle it alone as long as I have a car."

"Alright, then rent a car for tomorrow."

"A rental? I've been borrowing a car from the innkeeper... Is that not good enough?"

"The target has probably seen that car a few times already. It wouldn't be ideal for tailing."

"..."

There was a brief silence.

"So, the person we're tailing is someone from the Utakata Inn?"

"You'll find out tomorrow. There's one more thing I need you to prepare. I don't care about the cost, so find a local detective or whatever you need to get it."

"Depends on what it is. What do you need?"

I grinned.

"A recording device."

...After finishing the call with Kageno, Ujigami spoke.

"Are you planning something extremely underhanded?"

"Hey, come on, I'm an upstanding lawyer. I've never used underhanded tactics, and I don't plan to start now. Don't accuse me without evidence."

"No, I've got evidence."

"...Oh? Let's hear it."

Ujigami pointed his fork at me.

"When you finished talking with Kageno, you grinned. Based on my past experience, whenever you make that face, it means someone's about to get conned."

"Hmph, say what you want. You're done here, so go on home."

"Yeah, I'll do that. I'm getting sick and tired of having meals with you. Well, I'll watch the trial results on the news, so do your best to give me a good laugh."

It was true that I couldn't imagine food tasting good when you were having it face-to-face with him.

However, even though Ujigami said that, he still managed to devour all four lunch specials, and on top of that, he ordered three more jumbo deluxe parfaits — some sugary monstrosity that looked even more nauseating than the photos of the corpse — leaving the waitress utterly dumbfounded.

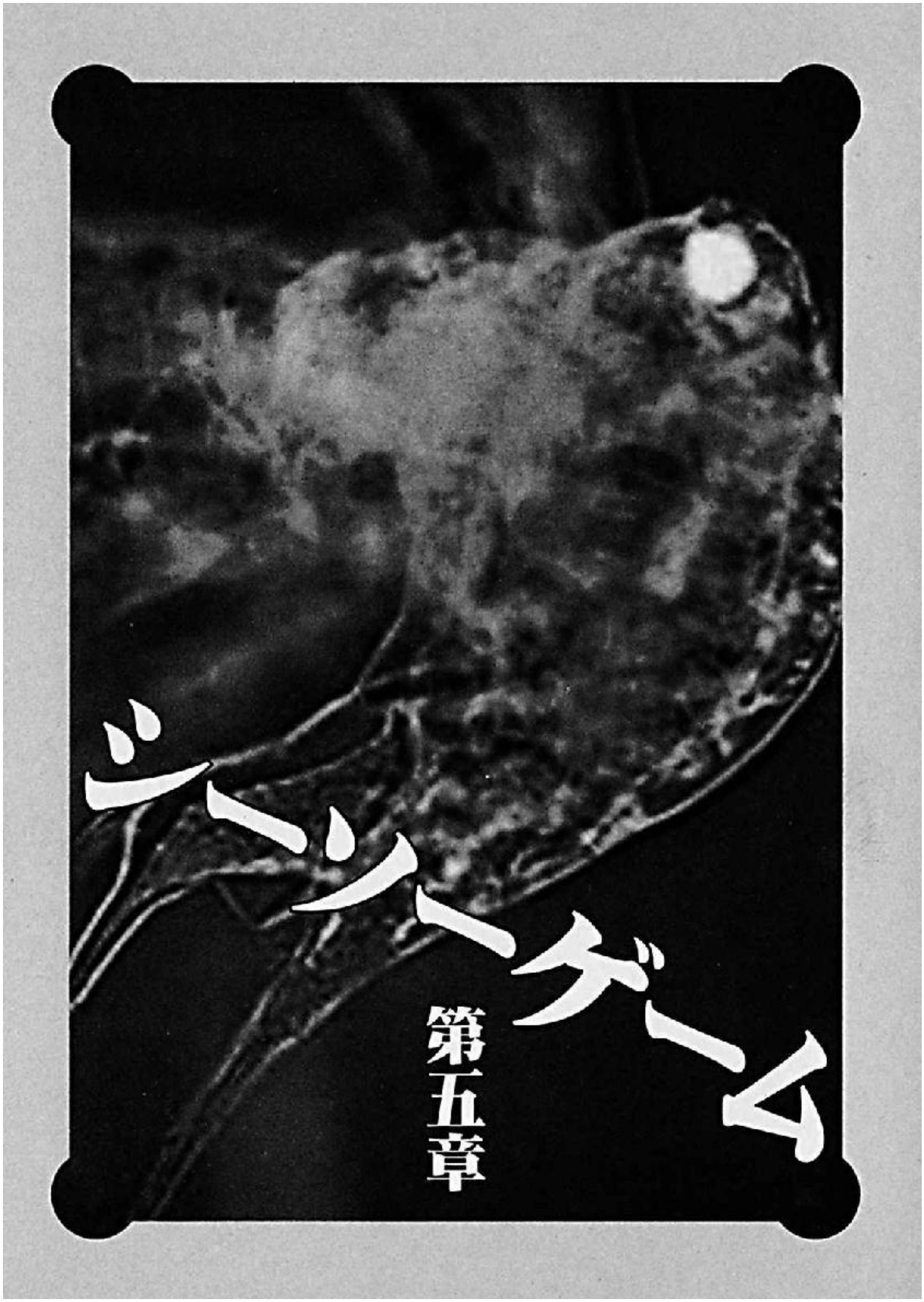
Seriously, just like that useless detective, why was it that everyone around me seemed to completely lose any sense of restraint when it came to free food?

But, if I grinned, someone was bound to get conned — huh.

It did seem like that might be true. I felt like someone said something similar to me before. Was it Satsuki?

Well, whatever. I was a lawyer. My job was to protect my client's rights. I'd do whatever it took to achieve that. Of course, I wouldn't do anything illegal.

The tactics I’d likely employ tomorrow might not be the most commendable. But if it was to corner the real culprit, then this level of action should be permissible. Above all, I wasn't doing anything illegal.


デスゲーム
第五章

Chapter 5: See-Saw Game

December 16th, 9:00 AM, District Courtroom Number 1

"The court is now in session with Judge Ikegami presiding! All rise!"

The bailiff's voice echoed throughout the courtroom.

Once again, the gallery was packed to capacity. Among those present were Tomoyasu Ichinomiya, the victim's brother, the attending physician Shozo Kasai, and even Barcode Igarashi.

Judge Ikegami, who entered shortly afterward, took his seat and allowed everyone to sit down after asking the usual question of whether anyone had contacted the jurors. Then, he turned to me.

"Defense counsel, are you ready to proceed?"

"Yes, we are ready."

"Then please call your first witness."

"Yes, I will. For the defense's first witness—"

Let's start with him.

"Dr. Kasai."

The testimony I needed from this doctor was extremely simple.

"Dr. Kasai, you testified that you prescribed Halcion to one of the defendants, Mr. Koji Nioka, correct?"

"Yes."

"Now, among the other individuals involved in this case, did you prescribe Halcion to anyone else?"

"…Well. No, I believe he was the only one."

"That's strange. According to my investigation, you should have prescribed Halcion to someone else recently."

"Oh, I remember now. You're talking about Ms. Ichinomiya, right? I'm sorry, when you said 'involved in the case,' I was only thinking of the living."

"Understood. Prosecutor Togasaki, do you have any cross-examination?"

"Nothing in particular."

"Very well, call the next witness."

So far, everything was going smoothly, as expected.

The crucial part was next. I needed to show what I intended to prove.

"Then, for the next witness—"

To do that, I have to put him on the stand.

"I call one of the defendants, Mr. Koji Nioka."

A quiet ripple of tension spread through the courtroom.

Amid the strange atmosphere of tension, Koji Nioka, with his still villainous-looking face, stood at the witness stand, trying to maintain his composure.

In the trials I had won so far, I had always avoided having the defendant themselves testify unless I was absolutely confident of victory. The reason was simple: you never knew what kind of blunder might be made — or forced — during cross-examination.

In this case, though, it was necessary to put him on the stand to argue the suicide theory, but if I could've, I would've preferred to put his wife on the stand instead. The reason was simple: the wife, who looked better than her villainous-looking husband, would more likely elicit sympathy from the jury. Plus, if the opponent was a woman, there was a chance that Prosecutor Togasaki might go easier on her during cross-examination.

But this time, I couldn't use that tactic. On the contrary, I feared it might be seen as improper to have the wife, instead of the husband, take on such an important role. Although it might be considered sexism, in a situation like this, where both husband and wife were present, putting the wife on the stand instead of the husband would look bad.

"Now then, Mr. Nioka. Could you please testify again about your relationship with the victim?"

"Y-Yes. He was my wife's mother's second husband, which makes him my father-in-law."

"Thank you. On December 10th, around 4 PM, you met with the victim near the seaside at the 'Seaside Hill Park,' correct?"

"Yes."

"What kind of conversation did you have?"

"My father-in-law... He seemed deeply regretful about driving my mother-in-law to suicide. They got married because they got along well as single people, but in the past few months, my mother-in-law's health deteriorated rapidly, and she could no longer go out easily, which made life feel dull. My father-in-law got too absorbed in his hobbies and... He was truly regretful about it."

"I see. Did the victim say anything else?"

"He wished my wife and me a long and happy life together..."

So far, everything was going according to plan. He hadn't said anything unnecessary.

"After hearing that, what did you and your wife do?"

"Yes. It seemed to us that he was about to commit suicide. So, together with my wife, we tried to comfort him, or rather encourage him... In any case, we tried to cheer him up."

"Would you say that from an outsider's perspective, it might have seemed like you and your wife were pressing the victim?"

"Your Esteemed Honor," Togasaki stood up, looking somewhat reluctant, "I object to this question as it calls for speculation rather than facts."

"Objection sustained."

"I'll rephrase the question. If you saw that the person you were talking to seemed like they were about to commit suicide, wouldn't you desperately try to stop them?"

"I object for the same reason."

"Objection sustained."

"No further questions."

Well, that was about it. This should have been enough to make the jury reconsider the possibility that the victim's cause of death was suicide.

"Then, I will proceed with the cross-examination."

Togasaki slowly stood up, looking down on me as he did.

"Mr. Nioka. You testified that your father-in-law, Mr. Akiyuki Ichinomiya, seemed like he might commit suicide, correct?"

"Yes."

"And you said he told you and your wife to live a long and happy life together, right?"

"Yes, that's correct."

"Did he say anything else?"

"Anything else... What do you mean?"

"The victim, Mr. Akiyuki Ichinomiya, was a man of considerable wealth, wasn't he?"

"Objection!"

I slammed my hand on the desk.

"The prosecution's question is outside the scope of cross-examination. In cross-examination, the questions are supposed to pertain only to facts that were brought up during direct examination. I didn't ask anything about the victim's assets during direct examination."

"Then I will rephrase the question. Did the victim say anything to you about his assets?"

"Objection, for the same reason!"

"No, this time it's different, counsel. You asked about the conversation between the victim and this witness. Therefore, I have the right to inquire about the entire conversation."

"I'm afraid I must overrule the objection. The witness will answer the question."

Koji Nioka looked at me as if seeking help. What I wanted to signal to him was to say, "I don't remember." But in a situation like this, any gesture that could be interpreted as me instructing the witness on how to testify could backfire with the jury. In the end, I could only watch.

"Y-Yes... He did say something like that."

Hey, don't be so honest. No one else heard that conversation, so you could've just brushed it off. Damn, I should've given him clear instructions.

...Well, even if he had denied it or played dumb, Prosecutor Togasaki would probably have come back with something like, "Isn't it unnatural that a person about to commit suicide wouldn't say anything about their assets to the people who would become their heirs?"

"So, what exactly did the victim say about his assets?"

"He said something like, 'I don't have much to leave you, but please forgive me...'"

"I see, thank you very much.

Now, I've had a certain suspicion ever since I heard your testimony.

Recently, the trial for another murder charge against you ended, and the death of one woman was ruled a suicide. As you all know, that woman was the victim's wife, Shoko Ichinomiya.

If Mr. Akiyuki Ichinomiya, as you said, believed that he was responsible for driving his wife to suicide, then it's possible that he might have committed suicide himself.

However, unfortunately, the conversation that allegedly took place by the seaside was only heard by you and your wife, who are now both accused of murder. Even if you added whatever color you wanted to the story, no one would be able to contradict it."

To begin with, according to Dr. Honjo's forensic analysis, the victim drowned in the sea and was then abandoned in a freshwater area mixed with hot spring water. Don't you think it's a bit far-fetched to claim the victim committed suicide while ignoring this result?"

"T-That's…"

Nioka looked at me with the eyes of a calf about to be loaded onto a truck.

"Your Honor, the prosecution is asking the witness to speculate."

"Very well, I'll change the question.

Now then — I've had a certain suspicion for some time. The reason your mother-in-law committed suicide was because, despite the fact that the day she died was her birthday, not a single relative, including yourself, remembered that fact, correct?"

"Y-Yes."

"Moreover, she was already in quite poor physical and mental health, which ultimately led her to commit suicide — if I recall, that's what was determined, correct?"

"Y-Yes."

"That means the cause of your mother-in-law's suicide could be said to have been created by you and your wife, couldn't it?"

"…I can't deny that."

"If that's the case, then wasn't the conversation you had with the victim at the seaside actually like this?

The victim pressed you and said, 'The reason my wife committed suicide is because of you two!'"

"Objection, Your Honor!"

I slammed my hand on the desk with all my might, but Togasaki ignored me and raised his voice.

" 'It's your fault that my wife was driven to suicide! I don't have a single penny to leave to people like you!' Isn't that what he said to you!?"

"T-That's not true! How could you say such a thing!?"

Nioka, who had been cowering timidly all along, could not tolerate this one thing and shouted out in anger.

"You must have been shocked when you heard you wouldn't inherit anything! And when you tried to convince him by pressing him further, you ultimately couldn't change his mind! Isn't that why you lost your temper!?"

"Please, wait! No, I'm telling you, that's not what happened!"

"And finally, in a fit of rage, you killed the victim! Yes, with the very expression you have on your face right now!"

"What…"

At that moment, he suddenly realized and stiffened his expression. With a naturally villainous face, Nioka certainly looked like someone capable of murder when he was angry.

But there was no time to be impressed by such things. I quickly slammed my hand on the desk.

"Your Honor, the defense requests that all of the prosecution's recent statements be struck from the record!"

The defendant, desperately denying the accusations of the Hyena Prosecutor who was pressing him provocatively, and the loud sound of a desk being slammed — perhaps influenced by such a rough exchange, the gallery began to murmur.

Unable to tolerate this, the judge banged his gavel three times.

"Order! Everyone, please maintain order. Anyone who does not comply immediately will be ordered to leave the courtroom!"

With that lethal phrase, no one in the gallery dared to resist. The courtroom quickly regained its order.

The judge nodded in satisfaction.

"It seems to have quieted down. Now then — Prosecutor Togasaki, I must say that the manner of your questioning earlier was not particularly commendable."

"My apologies."

I was sick of seeing this guy apologize.

"For the time being, I will have all of Prosecutor Togasaki's statements from the point where the defense objected struck from the record. Members of the jury, please do not consider them and erase them from your memory."

This was what you called 'closing the barn door after the horse has bolted'. How exactly were they supposed to erase it from their memory?

"The cross-examination is over."

The Hyena Prosecutor concluded and slowly returned to his seat.

"Defense, do you have any redirect examination?"

"No, Your Honor."

"Very well. Call the next witness."

"The next witness is Dr. Honjo, who conducted the autopsy on the body."

Now then. Today's courtroom session was far from over.

In the end, unless I could present a reasonable explanation for why a victim who died at sea was found near Abuku Lake in the mountains, the suicide theory was nothing but a pie in the sky. So next, I'd be proving that.

"Dr. Honjo, you cited the presence of plankton in the victim's organs as evidence that he drowned at sea, correct?"

"Yes."

"However, according to what I've discovered, plankton are not only found in bodies of water like the sea or ponds, but also in tap water and even in the air we breathe. Therefore, when detecting plankton from a corpse, special care must be taken to ensure that plankton from the air or tap water doesn't accidentally get mixed in, correct?"

"Yes, well, that's true."

"After taking such careful steps, only when the plankton detected in the water from the location where the victim drowned matches the plankton found in the organs can the location of drowning be accurately identified, correct?"

"Y-Yes, well…"

"Then — I can't help but wonder about something. Dr. Honjo, did you take a water sample from the location where the victim drowned?"

Dr. Honjo, who didn't seem like someone with much emotional fluctuation to begin with, didn't show any obvious signs of agitation.

"No, wait a moment. I didn't know where the victim drowned, so I couldn't take a water sample from that location.

I just informed the police and the prosecution that plankton, which only lives in the sea, was detected in the victim's organs."

"I see. In other words, neither you nor the prosecution were able to accurately determine where the victim drowned, correct?"

"Yes, well. But as I've said many times, the fact that plankton, which only lives in the sea, was detected is a fact, so it's reasonable to assume that the victim drowned at sea."

"I see. Then next…

The plankton you detected in the victim's organs were diatoms, correct?"

"Y-Yes."

"And as I mentioned earlier, plankton are found not only in water but also in the air we breathe every day, correct? Furthermore, diatomaceous earth, which is used in things like grills, insulation materials, and lacquerware, is made from the accumulated remains of diatom plankton, correct?"

"…Yes, well, that's true."

At this point, I raised one finger.

"Now, this is the important point.

Yesterday, I spoke with an expert on corpses, who told me something interesting.

Dr. Honjo, diatomaceous earth is essentially a mass of plankton. So, if we're in contact with something made from diatomaceous earth, like a wall with fireproofing that contains it, we're inhaling air mixed with plankton every day, correct?

The air we inhale is absorbed from the lungs into the bloodstream. Therefore, even if someone didn't drown in the sea, plankton from diatomaceous sources could be detected in organs like the liver or kidneys, correct?"

The gallery buzzed. Even Dr. Honjo and, unusually, Togasaki's faces stiffened.

"What do you think, Doctor? Please answer the question."

"W-Well, yes, that's a possibility. But the amount of plankton we inhale daily is minimal, so…"

"But if someone's job involves handling diatomaceous earth, it's possible they could inhale a large amount of plankton, right?"

"Y-Yes, well…"

The best kind of cross-examination was the one that left the witness with nothing to say but "Yes, well."

"B-But wait a minute. I've been informed that the victim didn't have a job or hobby that involved handling diatomaceous earth."

"I see. Then let me add one more thing. Do you know what kind of hobbies Akiyuki Ichinomiya, the victim, had?"

"H-Hobbies? I've heard that he kept fish…"

"Now, did you know that the fish were saltwater fish?"

"N-No. But I don't think handling seawater would cause someone to inhale plankton."

"Dr. Honjo, that's not what I'm getting at. The victim kept fish at a hot spring inn located in the mountains. The nearest sea is a whole hour away by car. So, did the victim go through the trouble of drawing seawater from that far away? No, there was no need for that.

Normally, people who keep saltwater fish use something like this to create artificial seawater."

I took out a cylindrical container to show him. It was about the size of a juice can, but made of plastic, labeled "Essence of the Sea - From Okinawa."

"This is something called artificial seawater. It contains all the components of natural seawater, including salt and minerals, in powdered form. All you have to do is mix this powder with water, and you can create seawater anywhere.

The raw material is natural seawater, concentrated to produce this. Dr. Honjo, I'll give this to you. If you take it home and look at it under a microscope, you'll surely be able to confirm that it contains plankton, like those from the 'Coscinodiscus' species, which should only exist in the sea."

"..."

When I handed him the instant sea powder, Honjo took it without saying anything.

"Furthermore, Dr. Honjo, did you know that the victim suffered from asthma and often coughed on a daily basis?"

"…I've heard about that."

I smiled wryly.

"You understand what I'm getting at, don't you? In other words, if the victim were to cough while using such powder, the plankton-laden powder would scatter everywhere, and he would end up inhaling a large amount, don't you think?"

"O-Objection, leading the witness."

This development must have been unexpected. For once, Togasaki's objection lacked its usual sharpness.

"Oh, my, what part of my question was leading? I'm simply asking for confirmation of the facts, but since it seems to displease the prosecutor, I'll rephrase.

Dr. Honjo, what happens if you cough while handling flour, for example? The powder will scatter into the air, right?"

"W-Well, yes."

"In that case, by simply breathing in that space, you'd naturally inhale air mixed with flour, wouldn't you?"

"Well, that's what would happen…"

"In other words, if the victim, who lived such a daily life, drowned, even if it wasn't in the sea, isn't it entirely possible that plankton, which should only exist in the sea, could be detected in his organs?"

"O-Objection, Your Honor! The defense is engaging in baseless speculation!"

But the judge did not rule in Togasaki's favor.

"I don't see it that way. Based on the testimony so far, the defense's argument is highly logical. Moreover, this witness has provided testimony that supports that logic. The witness is an expert in forensic medicine and should have the knowledge and qualifications to answer such questions. The witness should respond."

"…I-I can't deny the possibility."

"Thank you, that's what I wanted to hear."

I smiled wryly.

Now, for the final touch.

This witness was now thoroughly cornered. His pride as an expert had been wounded, and he was in a situation where he might even lose his reputation as a forensic pathologist.

If I gave him a way out here, he'd likely seize it immediately. However, in exchange, I'd have him throw Togasaki under the bus.

"Dr. Honjo, I asked you at the beginning. Even if plankton is detected in the organs, to confirm that it was truly absorbed during drowning, you must first collect water from the location where the victim drowned, detect plankton from that water, and compare it with the plankton found in

the organs. Only when several types match can the data be considered reliable. You agreed with me on that, didn't you?"

"Y-Yes, that's correct."

"However, you didn't collect water from the location where the victim drowned. Instead, you focused solely on the fact that plankton, which lives in the sea, was detected in the organs, and testified that the victim drowned at sea without pointing out the possibility that the plankton could have entered the body through a cause other than drowning. Why did an expert like you ignore such an important possibility and give that testimony?"

"T-That's…"

As cornered witnesses always did, Honjo looked over at Togasaki.

However, as prosecutors always did when their weak point was exposed, Togasaki remained silent, offering no help.

"Dr. Honjo. Since you seem to have difficulty answering, let me rephrase the question.

When you performed the autopsy on the victim, did you receive any guidance from the police or the prosecution beforehand?"

"…I'm not sure I understand the intent of your question."

"I'll rephrase. When you performed the autopsy, were you asked by the police or the prosecution to confirm whether the victim was killed at sea?

No, let me put it another way. When you performed the autopsy, was there anyone who asked you to investigate the possibility that the victim was killed at sea?"

Dr. Honjo glanced back and forth between the Hyena Prosecutor and me, but finally, he answered with a resigned tone.

"Y-Yes. I was certainly asked something along those lines."

Togasaki's face turned pale. I see, so when he got rattled, it showed in his complexion rather than his expression.

"Is that so? Thank you. Now, did you point out to the prosecution the possibility that the plankton detected in the organs could have entered through a cause other than drowning?"

"Yes, of course."

"And what did the prosecution say in response?"

"They told me to keep that possibility under wraps because it wasn't relevant to our case…"

The courtroom began to buzz all at once.

"I object, Your Honor! The defense is maliciously trying to unjustly discredit us, the prosecution. I was merely trying to simplify the points of contention!"

Togasaki spoke with his usual air of confidence, but this time his dignified attitude only made him seem more disingenuous, though he himself probably didn't notice.

"And one more thing," Togasaki continued, undeterred. "As I'm sure the jurors and everyone in the gallery are aware, this defense attorney is skilled at finding even the smallest flaw, completely unrelated to the trial, and then twisting it around as if he's made a monumental discovery, confusing the points of discussion in the trial. Simplifying the points of contention is a perfectly reasonable measure."

As usual, his tongue was well-oiled. Not to be outdone, I fired back.

"That's quite a statement, prosecutor. But I'm not sure it's a good idea to simplify the points of contention to the extent that it eliminates any reasonable doubt."

"Isn't forcibly interpreting an extremely small possibility as reasonable doubt what you should call a leap in logic?"

Togasaki didn't back down an inch, countering with a challenging tone. Despite showing a hint of emotion earlier, he had already regained his usual composure, as expected of the Hyena Prosecutor.

This was the perfect opportunity to settle the score for all the times he had made an example out of me. I came up with a plan and decided to deliberately take the bait of Togasaki's provocation.

"As expected of Prosecutor Togasaki. Instead of staying in your proper workplace in Tokyo, you've gone out of your way to come here and snatch up the work of the local prosecutor's office. It seems that a Hyena Prosecutor like yourself has a different perspective on things than we do."

Togasaki, as if he had anticipated this, turned to the judge with a faint smile on his face.

"Your Esteemed Honor, the defense's statement just now is clearly out of line. I would like to ask Your Honor to issue a stern warning to the defense attorney."

"Indeed—"

The judge spoke with a weary expression.

"Calling someone a hyena is somewhat inappropriate in a courtroom. Counsel, you should be more mindful of the atmosphere. Take this not as a warning, but as a reprimand."

"I understand, Your Honor. I fully understand that calling someone a hyena is wrong. I vow here that I will never make such a statement again.

By the way, Your Honor. For instance, would it be wrong to call a hyena ‘this prosecutor!’?"

"…What?"

Perhaps the question was so unexpected that the judge was left dumbfounded with his mouth open.

"Well, I suppose that would be a matter of personal freedom."

I grinned and pointed my finger at Prosecutor Togasaki, then shouted.

"This prosecutor!"

The courtroom was instantly enveloped in a wave of laughter.

The only one not laughing was the hyena, whose face turned bright red as he squirmed in his seat. If he wanted to go up against me, then it was only fair that he suffered at least this much.

"No further questions."

After that, there was a bit of an uproar as Togasaki demanded that I be sanctioned again, but it was quickly resolved when I offered a heartfelt apology, and since there was no cross-examination, we moved on to the next witness.

"As the defense’s final witness, I call Officer Kinoshita."

Now then — with the series of questions to Dr. Honjo, I should have created a reasonable doubt that could overturn the possibility that the victim drowned in the sea.

The next issue was those small stones found wedged in the tire of the defendant’s car.

It was said that these small stone could only be found in a specific location around Lake Abuku. As long as this piece of evidence existed, along with the fact that the victim was found near a river close to Lake Abuku, the question of what the defendants were doing at Lake Abuku would

continue to linger. As a result, some jurors may come to believe that the defendants were the ones who disposed of the body.

I'd need to overturn this next.

However, "There were small stones stuck in the tire. These are those small stones," was a fact difficult to overturn.

But there was an old saying among lawyers:

When the law is against you, pound the facts. When the facts are against you, pound the law.

By the way, what do you do if both are against you? Well, you pound the table, of course.

"Now, Officer Kinoshita. You discovered the defendants' car in the police station parking lot on the night of December 10th, the day of the incident, correct?"

"Yes, that's right."

"And at that time, both defendants were at the station being questioned in connection with the death of Akiyuki Ichinomiya, and you were aware of that, correct?"

"Yes."

I pulled out a piece of paper.

"This is your testimony from the day before yesterday when you took the stand:

'At that time, I already knew that the Nioka couple had come to the station for questioning related to the discovery of Akiyuki Ichinomiya's body. So... I decided to inspect the car on a whim.' …Do you recall giving this testimony?"

"I don't remember the exact details, but yes, I did give such testimony."

I raised my index finger.

"Here's something I find puzzling. Why did you feel the need to examine the defendants' car?"

"Well… there's no real explanation for it. It's in the testimony record — I just felt like it."

"Weren't there a lot of other cars in the parking lot besides the defendants' car?"

"Yes, I suppose so."

"But you weren't drawn to any of the other cars and just happened to check the defendants' car, which was parked there, correct?"

"Yes, that's right."

"By the way, changing the subject, I understand you were also involved in the recent case of the death of Shoko Ichinomiya, the wife of the victim in this case?"

Officer Kinoshita seemed a bit taken aback by the sudden change in topic, but quickly regained his composure and answered.

"Yes. It was an incident that occurred in Abuku Town, which is under my jurisdiction."

"However, Koji Nioka, who was arrested in that case, was acquitted and released, correct?"

"Yes. And what of it?"

I paused for a moment before speaking.

"Weren't you frustrated?"

"…What do you mean?"

"The suspect you and your fellow officers worked so hard to arrest and indict was acquitted and released just like that. Weren't you frustrated?"

"W-we don't conduct investigations out of personal grudges. The fact that Mr. Nioka was acquitted simply means we avoided wrongly punishing him. Feeling frustrated would be completely out of line."

"You say you just happened to notice the defendants' car in the parking lot full of cars, correct?"

"Y-Yes."

"And at that time, you also knew that new suspicions were starting to arise about the defendants, correct?"

"…Well, I heard they were being questioned."

"Then, when you found the defendants' car in the parking lot, didn't you think that if you could find evidence linking the Nioka couple to this case, you could settle the old score?"

Officer Kinoshita's face suddenly turned pale. The gallery buzzed, and Togasaki stood up.

"Objection!"

"Very well, I'll withdraw the question and move on to the next."

I shrugged as I said this, and Togasaki, with a sour expression, sat down. I waited for the slightly buzzing gallery to quiet down before continuing.

"Officer Kinoshita. If you don't mind, how old are you?"

"…Huh? My age?"

"Yes, that's right."

"I'm forty-six."

"Oh, forty-six, is it? I understand this might be a rather impolite thing to say, but I'll dare to ask. Generally speaking, police officers tend to be promoted to sergeant or senior officer by their mid-thirties, isn't that right? However, it seems you're still a patrol officer even in your mid-forties."

As expected, Officer Kinoshita's mood soured instantly.

"Yes, you're right, but what of it?"

"Why are you still a patrol officer?"

"Objection! This question is entirely irrelevant to the case. In fact, it seems to be a malicious attempt to undermine this witness!"

I turned to the judge.

"This witness is the person who supposedly discovered extremely important evidence in this case. As the defense, I believe we should be allowed to question the reliability of that evidence."

"…I understand that, counsel. But I don't see how that relates to this witness's rank."

"Understood. Then I'll rephrase the question.

Officer Kinoshita. I've been wondering why you've remained at the lowest rank of patrol officer despite being in your mid-forties.

And yesterday, after having my assistant look into it, I discovered something. Before you were stationed in Abuku Town, you were working in Tokyo, weren't you?"

Officer Kinoshita's face suddenly turned pale, and he frantically shouted.

"W-Wait a minute! That has nothing to do with this case! It's completely unfair to bring that up here!"

"No, this is an important question regarding your credibility.

Officer Kinoshita, while you were working as a police officer in Tokyo, you were suspected of sexually harassing a female student who visited the police box, weren't you?"

The courtroom buzzed.

"T-That's not true! That was just a misunderstanding! I didn't do anything improper!"

"Your Esteemed Honor, I object! The defense is bringing up matters completely unrelated to this case in an attempt to discredit this witness and disrupt these proceedings!"

"Objection sustained."

"Understood, then let me rephrase my question.

Officer Kinoshita. Normally, a police officer's rank starts at patrol officer, and if they pass the promotion exam, they can advance to sergeant, correct?"

"…Yes, that's right."

"However, even if they don't take the promotion exam, as long as there are no particular issues with their performance, it's said that by your age, they can be promoted to senior patrol officer, which is the rank between patrol officer and sergeant, correct?"

"..."

"However, despite being forty-six years old, you're still a patrol officer.

Why is that? Could it be because you caused some sort of problem in the past?"

"Your Esteemed Honor!" Togasaki stood up again. "I would like to raise an objection for the same reasons as earlier."

"Then let me change my question.

Officer Kinoshita, you are currently a resident officer in Abuku Town, correct?"

"Yes, that's right," he answered in a thorny tone. I held another piece of paper in my hand.

"Please recall something else you testified to the day before yesterday.

Regarding the location where the sulfur-stained stones, which are evidence for the prosecution, were collected, you testified as follows:

'Well, given that it's near a tourist spot, it doesn't see much foot traffic, and while the view isn't all that bad, you do get the occasional group of young people who pull up just to fool around.'"

"…Yes, I vaguely remember that."

"You are a resident officer in Abuku Town, correct?"

"I've said that multiple times."

"Then naturally, your duties include patrolling the area around Abuku Town, correct?"

"Yes, that's correct."

"How do you conduct your patrols? By bicycle? Or on foot?"

"Sometimes by bicycle, but usually I use a patrol car."

"When you were patrolling, did you ever find young people making a racket in areas where sulfur was spewing out?"

"Well, yes."

"What do you do when you find such young people?"

"Of course, I warn them."

"In other words, you often drive your patrol car into those areas where sulfur is spewing out, right?"

"Yes, that's correct."

Officer Kinoshita didn't seem to understand what this line of questioning was leading to, but Togasaki, sharp as ever, seemed to have caught on to my intent and had turned slightly pale.

"Now, to change the subject again, on the night of December 10th, the night of the incident, you were at the prefectural police station, correct?"

"I've said that multiple times."

"How did you get to the police station?"

"By patrol car."

"The same one you usually use for patrols, correct?"

"Yes, that's right."

I grinned.

"Officer Kinoshita. You testified that you drove your patrol car into the area where the sulfur-stained stones, which were submitted as evidence by the prosecution, were collected.

Doesn't that suggest the possibility that the stone might have been stuck in the tire of your patrol car as well?

And when you found the defendants' car in the police station parking lot, didn't you think something along these lines? If you could prove that this car had been near the location where the body was found, it would be a great achievement. An achievement so great it could make up for any mistakes you've made in the past."

"Your Esteemed Honor, I object!"

Togasaki shouted something, and the gallery suddenly erupted in murmurs, but I ignored it and continued.

"Then you realized! There were small stones stuck in your patrol car's tire that could only have come from near Lake Abuku! If you claimed those stones had been collected from the defendants' car, wouldn't things go exactly as you wanted? That was entirely possible for you, especially since you were the only one there!"

…What followed in the courtroom was the usual chaos.

Togasaki fiercely objected, calling it baseless speculation, the spectators murmured, and the judge banged his gavel, trying to restore order.

It took about a minute for the courtroom to quiet down.

The judge looked at me with a weary expression.

"Counsel, I can't say I approve of your methods either."

"My apologies. No further questions."

I backed down obediently.

Whether this officer Kinoshita really fabricated evidence or not — that didn't matter at all.

The important thing was that Officer Kinoshita was a police officer with a history of issues, who hadn't been promoted, who was a resident officer in Abuku Town, and who was alone when he discovered the stone in the defendants' car. The truth was secondary; my job was to use the situation to secure the greatest possible advantage for my client.

It was up to the jurors to decide the rest. Even so, I believed I had created enough room for reasonable doubt.

"Prosecution, do you have any cross-examination?"

"Nothing in particular, Your Honor."

"…Very well. As I recall, the current witness was the defense's final witness. Counsel, is that correct?"

"Yes, that's correct. I've done everything I needed to do."

"Very well. This concludes the presentation of evidence by both the prosecution and the defense.

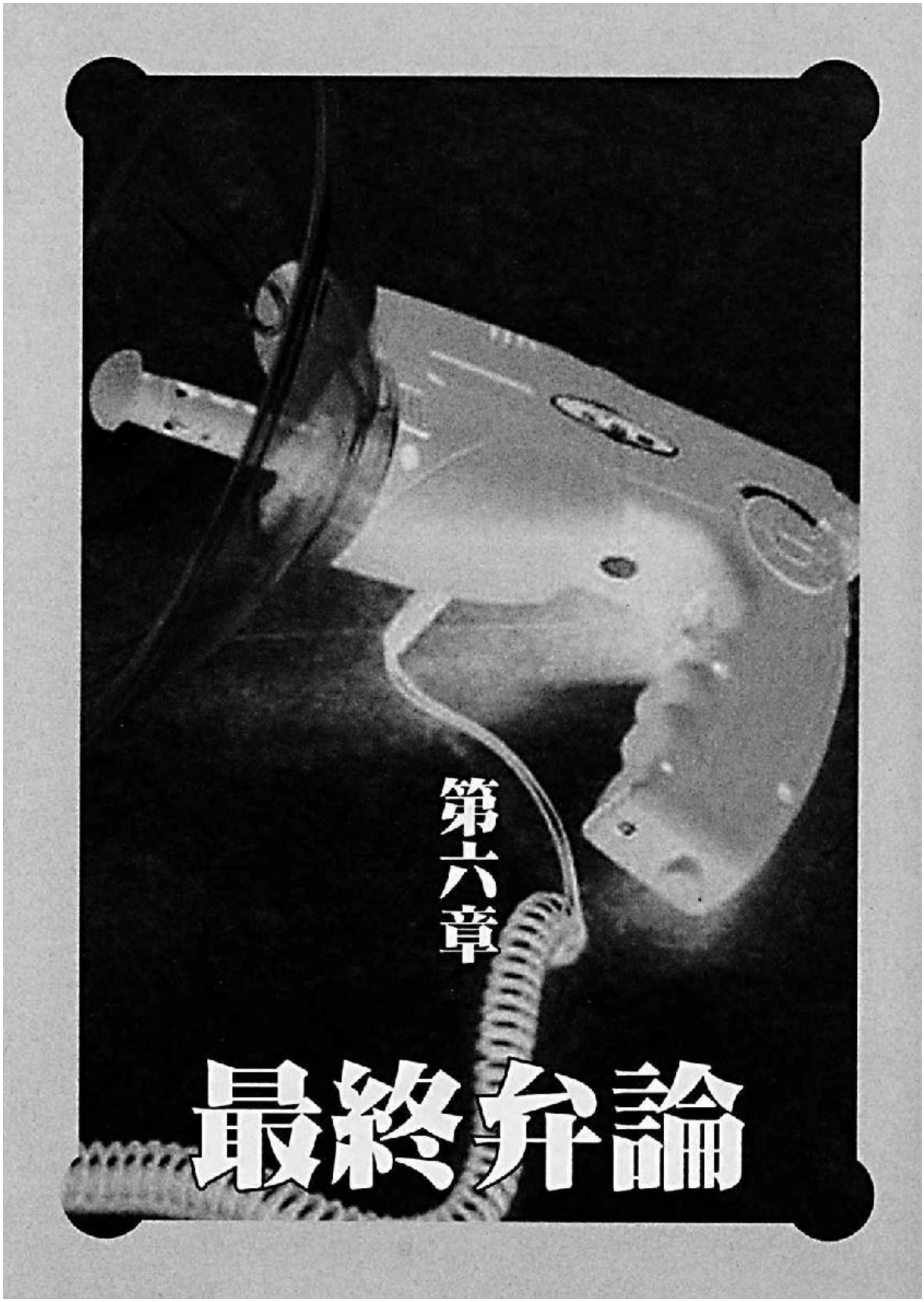
We will now proceed to closing arguments.

The defense is scheduled to make their closing argument first… Counsel, if necessary, we can take a recess here. What do you think?"

"No, that won't be necessary. If it's all right with you, I'd like to proceed directly to the closing argument."

Now was the time to sweep the jurors — who had been exposed to various possibilities and had their hearts swayed — over to my side with a flood of words. There was no need to take an unnecessary break and lose momentum.

"Very well. Then, Counsel Yamashika, please begin."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Chapter 6: The Final Argument

Closing arguments. During the trial, both I and the prosecutor were generally not allowed to express our opinions, but this was the only occasion where we were permitted to not only state our opinions but also to speculate. …Well, that was just the official stance, of course; in reality, we freely used leading questions to do as we please.

In most of the criminal trials I handled, I usually discovered the real culprit — no, the true culprit — and resolved the case before reaching the closing arguments. However, since I was arguing for a suicide theory today, I had no choice.

If possible, I'd have liked to prepare my smooth tongue beforehand, but obviously, I didn't have anything like that prepared. Perhaps I should start keeping some sort of mouthwash on my desk from now on. No, now wasn't the time to be thinking about such trivial matters; everyone in the courtroom was focused on my every move.

I stood up from my seat and slowly walked in front of the five jurors.

"Now, ladies and gentlemen of the jury—"

Then, I put on the most friendly face I could muster. The nickname of "Host Trio" I shared with the other two wasn't entirely undeserved.

"First of all, I would like to express my gratitude and offer words of appreciation.

Serving as a juror is an extremely difficult task. We've taken up many hours of your valuable time, and on top of that, the fate of two human beings — the defendants — rests on your shoulders. It's a responsibility that is by no means light.

You've endured this long trial, and I sincerely thank you for quietly listening to my words up until this moment, despite the heavy burden of your duties as jurors.

Now then, everyone, I'd like you to first recall something fundamental. What is the purpose of this preliminary hearing?

The answer is simple: it is to present evidence that justifies suspecting the defendant of killing the victim. Naturally, the burden of presenting that evidence lies with Prosecutor Togasaki, but the question is, has Prosecutor Togasaki fulfilled that obligation?"

I made a broad sweeping gesture with both arms.

"Unfortunately, the answer to that question can only be 'No.' I will now carefully explain the basis for this conclusion.

But before that — now that my closing argument and Prosecutor Togasaki's closing argument are about to begin, once they are finished, you will enter a separate room and render a verdict on this trial. Therefore, I would like to take this moment to review all the evidence and testimonies that the prosecution has presented so far. By doing so, you will be able to examine the evidence more objectively.

First, let's recall the first witness that Prosecutor Togasaki called. That was a student named Watanabe. He testified that around 6 PM on the 10th of this month, he discovered the body of Akiyuki Ichinomiya, the victim in this case, caught on one of the bridge pillars near Abuku Town, and reported it to the police.

Regarding this point, although his testimony had some unique aspects, there isn't much room for doubt, and we, the defense, are willing to acknowledge that.

Now, let's move on to the second witness. That was Dr. Honjo, who conducted the autopsy on the body.

His testimony is extremely important. He testified as follows:

First, the cause of death was drowning. I have no objection to this point.

And Dr. Honjo also testified to this. The victim's lungs were filled with freshwater, while plankton, which should only exist in the sea, was detected in the liver and kidneys. From this, he concluded that the victim drowned in the sea and was later disposed of around Lake Abuku — this was his testimony.

He also testified that Halcion, a sleeping pill, and alcohol were detected in the victim's blood. Similarly, it was mentioned that when Halcion is taken together with alcohol, it can cause a person to fall into a stupor within minutes. In other words, the fact that these two substances were detected in the victim's blood suggests that the victim was in a comatose state at the time of death.

Moreover, while Dr. Honjo stated that it was difficult to determine the exact time of death, he did testify about when the victim was likely thrown into the water. According to him, based on the degree of skin maceration, it was likely between 5:30 and 6 PM on the same day at the earliest.

However, I believe you all remember when I cross-examined Dr. Honjo earlier.

Dr. Honjo newly testified that while plankton, which should only live in the sea, was detected in the victim's organs, it is unknown which sea it came from.

And he also testified that detecting plankton in organs is an extremely delicate task, and it's prone to contamination.

Plankton may seem like organisms that only exist in water. However, plankton is all around us, everywhere. They are even found in the air, in building materials, and in ceramics, and we breathe in air mixed with plankton on a daily basis.

Therefore — this is something Dr. Honjo himself acknowledged — even if plankton that only lives in the sea is detected in the organs, we cannot immediately trust that result. Because it's possible that it existed in the victim's body before drowning."

I emphasized this point by raising my index finger.

"Listen carefully, everyone. Dr. Honjo himself admitted that Akiyuki Ichinomiya, the victim, might have drowned not in the sea but in a freshwater lake or river. However, at the prosecution's direction, he concealed this important possibility.

Why did the prosecution instruct him to conceal this? Prosecutor Togasaki claimed it was to simplify the issues. Whether you can believe such a claim is up to you to decide.

Now then, who was the third witness for the prosecution? That was Dr. Shozo Kusai. He was the attending physician of the victim's late wife, and naturally, he had a close relationship with the victim as well.

His testimony went as follows: before this incident occurred, he prescribed Halcion to one of the defendants, Koji Nioka — this was his testimony.

Please remember. Halcion and alcohol were indeed detected in the victim's body. In other words, the prosecution wants to argue that the Halcion prescribed at that time was misused by the defendants to render the victim comatose and then drown him.

However, there is one more thing I'd like you to remember. Dr. Kusai did indeed testify that he prescribed Halcion to the defendant, Koji Nioka. But what else did he testify to? No, he didn't say anything further. That was the extent of his testimony.

In other words, there is no evidence whatsoever that the defendants used Halcion on the victim. Dr. Kusai simply prescribed the medication to Mr. Nioka, who was nervous and having trouble sleeping before the trial.

Additionally, Dr. Kusai took the stand again today and provided new testimony. He testified that recently, he prescribed Halcion not just to the defendant but also to the victim, Akiyuki Ichinomiya. There's nothing strange about this. The victim had just lost his wife. It's understandable that he would have developed insomnia.

Here we see another inconsistency in the prosecution's argument. The prosecution wants to claim that the defendants made the victim take alcohol and Halcion. However, based on Dr.

Kusai’s testimony, the victim had his own supply of Halcion. Who can prove that he didn’t take that medication himself at the time of his death?"

Next, do you recall the testimony of a witness named Tsutomu Ikegaya? He testified that around 4 PM on December 10th, he saw the three of them — the defendants and the victim — talking about something near the seaside at the "Seaside Hill Park."

I slightly bent my arms and exaggeratedly shrugged my shoulders.

At times like these, even a lawyer needed the qualities of an actor. And I was willing to do anything to win. Acting was just one of those things.

"But that’s all he testified to. I do not intend to object to the fact that my clients met with the victim at that time. But that’s all it is. The three of them were, after all, in a familial relationship, albeit by obligation. What’s wrong with family members meeting and having a conversation?

Let me repeat. The witness, Ikegaya, only saw the three of them talking!"

At times, I gestured with my hands, and at times, I raised my voice.

"Next, the prosecution called three police officers to the stand in succession: Detective Kusaka, Detective Kamei, and Officer Kinoshita.

They testified that around 7 PM on December 10th, they arrived at the scene where the body was discovered and began their investigation, that there was no basis for the alibi claimed by the defendants that they were at the hotel from 4 PM to 7 PM, and that the motive for the murder was that the victim had a large amount of assets, which the defendants could inherit if he died.

But what about these testimonies? Yesterday, we called Mr. Jun Hamamoto, an employee of the same hotel, as a witness for the defense. It's clear that discussing the details of his testimony wouldn’t please the honorable Prosecutor Togasaki, so I’ll refrain from doing so. However, Mr. Hamamoto did testify that, at the very least, the defendants entered the hotel room and used the bed. This, too, contradicts the prosecution’s claims.

Furthermore, Officer Kinoshita’s testimony was extremely important. Please remember.

His testimony was as follows:

He said that he was curious about the defendants' car, which was parked in the police station’s parking lot, so he examined it and found unusual small stones lodged in the tires that could only be collected from a specific area around Lake Abuku — that's what he said.

This evidence suggested that the defendants had gone near the site where the victim's body was found, which became one of the reasons for their arrest.

However, I've always had doubts about this witness, Officer Kinoshita. Despite being in his mid-forties, he remains at the lowest rank of officer. And he used to work in Tokyo. Why is someone like him working in a rural area like Abuku Town?

Upon investigation, I discovered something terrifying. In his previous workplace, he was suspected of sexually harassing a female student who visited the police box—"

"Objection, Your Esteemed Honor. The defense's statement was supposed to be removed from the record. Even in closing arguments, bringing this up here is inappropriate."

I shrugged my shoulders nonchalantly.

"Then let me withdraw my previous statement. But please remember this, everyone: why is it that every time I bring up Officer Kinoshita's past, the prosecution becomes so defensive and objects? If there's nothing to hide, he could simply say, 'There's no such fact,' and that would be the end of it, wouldn't it?"

I shrugged my shoulders dramatically and gave a bitter smile.

"Well, let's leave it at that, as digging further into this might anger Prosecutor Togasaki again.

However, the fact remains that Officer Kinoshita is still at the lowest rank of officer, despite being in his mid-forties. That is an undeniable fact.

Now, let's recall another fact. One of the defendants, Koji Nioka, had just been acquitted in another murder trial on December 10th, the same day this incident occurred.

What does it mean to be acquitted in a criminal trial? In Japan, the conviction rate in criminal trials exceeds ninety-nine percent. In such a reality, imagine if someone they arrested was found not guilty…?

You understand now, don't you? Being acquitted in a criminal trial means nullifying all the hard work of the police and, moreover, causing them to lose face.

Now that you're aware of this, let's return to the story of Officer Kinoshita discovering the small stones. At that time, the Nioka couple, who had not yet been arrested, were at the police station, which Officer Kinoshita had just exited after finishing another task. Yes, that Mr. Nioka, who had embarrassed the police.

What if, at that moment, Officer Kinoshita was able to single-handedly find evidence to arrest Mr. Nioka on another murder charge? He would have created an opportunity to restore the

police’s honor. That would surely be a remarkable achievement and could open the path to his promotion.

Moreover, he had driven to the police station from Abuku Town in a patrol car. He admitted that he usually patrolled the area around Lake Abuku in that patrol car. And — this is crucial — he even admitted that he had driven into the area where those small stones could be collected!"

Here, I paused slightly, lowered my tone, and continued.

"…Now then. At that time, he was the only person in the police station parking lot. What thoughts crossed the mind of a man who, despite being in his mid-forties, was still at the lowest rank of officer? What did he do? I leave that to your imagination.

These are the facts that the prosecution has established so far."

Here, I pretended to adjust my breathing, literally taking a breath, giving the jurors time to collect their thoughts.

Now. Even in closing arguments, simply delivering a speech wouldn’t be my style.

In this preliminary hearing, which was supposed to be nothing more than a procedural formality, it was rare to have the opportunity to hear such impassioned closing arguments. In this extraordinary closing argument, if I could show them my unique courtroom tactics, it would further strengthen the jurors' convictions.

"Now then, everyone.

In a criminal trial, the defense does not need to prove that the defendant is innocent. The burden of proving guilt lies entirely with the prosecution.

So, what if you have doubts about the prosecution's claims?

As jurors, you’ve likely heard this many times, but let me say it once more. Usually, in a criminal trial, the prosecution must prove the defendant’s guilt ‘beyond a reasonable doubt.’

Of course, what we are conducting now is a preliminary hearing, which can be considered a mock trial, and in this preliminary hearing, it is sufficient for the prosecution to present ‘evidence that justifies suspecting the defendant of committing the crime.’

However, please recall what the prosecution has done in this case. First, let’s talk about the prosecutor. Prosecutor Togasaki is a highly skilled prosecutor, but his usual place of work is in Tokyo. So why is he here in such a place? And that, too, when all we’re conducting is a mere preliminary hearing.

In other words, the prosecution is taking this preliminary hearing very seriously. If, hypothetically, a formal trial were to be held later, the prosecution would undoubtedly present the same evidence and testimonies that were presented in this preliminary hearing.

Trials are conducted with the taxes we pay. You must understand how much effort the prosecution is putting into this preliminary hearing. So — there's no need to conduct an expensive formal trial. Let's reach a verdict here and now.

With that in mind, I will acknowledge that the prosecution has made what appears to be a solid case.

However, I will say this firmly. You cannot fully believe the prosecution's claims — you must think that there is room for reasonable doubt.

Of course, it would be meaningless for me to say such things without backing them up. I would now like to prove my point to you."

Interest began to show on the faces of the jurors.

"Everyone, Prosecutor Togasaki has repeatedly claimed that I am a cunning and unscrupulous con-artist lawyer. As you are all aware, this is completely unfounded, but it is true that I have taken every possible measure to protect the rights of my clients. Some of you may already know this through the media.

And now, here I am, conducting this trial. Some of you may be expecting that I will pull off something outrageous once again, right?"

I flashed a grin at the five jurors.

"You are absolutely correct. And I will not betray your expectations.

Now, let me present to you a shocking truth.

All of the prosecution's claims thus far have been nothing but a mixture of fabrications and misinterpretations. I know this because the prosecution has made a fundamental oversight.

The prosecution has been asserting that Mr. Akiyuki Ichinomiya was murdered. But that itself is a colossal mistake.

Because he wasn't dead. Yes, he is still alive!"

A wave of shock silently took hold of the courtroom. Everyone was staring at me, mouths agape in astonishment.

Without missing a beat, I spread my left arm wide and pointed to the large door at the back of the courtroom.

"Everyone, please pay attention to the door at the back. Allow me to introduce the entrance of Mr. Akiyuki Ichinomiya, whom the prosecution claims to be dead!"

It wasn't just the jurors. Everyone turned their gaze to the back door with expressions of disbelief. Even Togasaki, who rarely showed such emotion, was looking back with a stunned expression.

Sharp gazes focused on the large door at the back of the courtroom, as if trying to pierce a hole through it.

However—

No matter how much time passed, the door did not open.

The spectators, who had been staring in shock, now began to look at me with skeptical eyes.

I smiled wryly and continued.

"Allow me to explain. Unfortunately, it seems that Mr. Akiyuki Ichinomiya will not be entering.

But that is of no consequence. What is more important is the fact that all of you focused your attention on that door.

If the jurors were fully convinced by the prosecution's claims, there is no way you would have believed my assertion that the victim was still alive. However, every single one of you, without exception, focused on that door. This is the clearest evidence that you have doubts about the prosecution's claims!

If there is room for reasonable doubt, you must find the defendants not guilty. In other words, the two defendants are innocent!"

A murmur ran through the spectators. Their faces showed expressions of understanding. This was the essence of Yamashika-style courtroom tactics. Take that, you damn Hyena Prosecutor.

Now, we had reached the climax of the closing argument.

"Everyone, let me say it once again. In a criminal trial, the defense does not need to prove that the defendant is innocent. The burden of proving guilt lies entirely with the prosecution. Therefore, there is absolutely no need for me to explain the truth of the case here and now.

However, if doing so will help the jurors with their deliberations, I would gladly explain the truth of the case.

Let me get straight to the point. The victim was not murdered by anyone. Because this was a suicide.

You must have heard that the victim's wife recently committed suicide. And shortly after learning of this, the victim, Mr. Akiyuki Ichinomiya, called his children-in-law and said to them, 'I don't have much to leave you, but I hope you two live happily together for a long time.'

Remember, there was a beer can that the victim had drunk from left on the beach. He must have been planning to commit suicide from that point. After that, he returned to Abuku Lake, where he had spent the last few months with his wife, took the Halcion he had been prescribed a few days earlier, and attempted to drown himself with the aid of alcohol.

This is the only explanation that rationally accounts for this incident. However, three unfortunate events that even he did not foresee occurred, resulting in new victims.

First, Mr. Koji Nioka, the victim's son-in-law, was acquitted in a separate criminal case, which earned him the strong animosity of the police. Second, the victim had a hobby of raising saltwater fish, and because he inhaled the powder of artificial seawater filled with sea plankton on a daily basis, it was determined that he had drowned in the sea, even though he had actually drowned in the lake. And lastly — there's Officer Kinoshita. I won't say more on this, as I suspect the prosecutor will object again."

Here, I paused to take another breath.

With this, eighty percent of my argument was complete.

The remaining twenty percent was simple. All that was left was to preemptively reveal what the prosecution would likely argue next and to inform the jurors of the extent of the suffering the two defendants had endured.

"Now, let me make a prediction. After I sit down, there will be a man who will stand up energetically and start speaking.

He will undoubtedly begin to explain in a seemingly plausible manner that the defense has been spouting baseless nonsense. That there is no room for doubt that the defendants committed the crime.

Everyone, imagine what the defendants have gone through.

The police and prosecution conducted a biased investigation, arrested the defendants based solely on circumstantial evidence, and within less than twenty-four hours of starting the

investigation, they were paraded before the media as cruel and inhuman murderers and dragged into this courtroom.

The defendants have already suffered enough. Why should they have had to endure such suffering in the first place? If they have committed any crime at all, it might be that they were acquitted in a previous trial just recently and earned the ire of the police.

Does a murder charge really suit them? It’s impossible.

But it’s not too late yet. Please, with your own hands, show them mercy.

Think about it. Here we have a man who was acquitted in a murder case and then, on the very day he was acquitted, supposedly committed another murder. Even though one murder case has concluded, neither the public nor the police would have forgotten about him. Do you think someone would commit another murder under such circumstances? No, it’s unthinkable.

Recall the testimony of Dr. Honjo, who conducted the post-mortem examination. He testified that plankton, which only exists in the sea, was found in the victim’s organs. But he also testified that he could not conclude that the victim drowned in the sea. Moreover, he said that it was Prosecutor Togasaki himself who instructed him to keep quiet about this.

And allow me to present one more hypothetical situation. What if — what if the small stones Officer Kinoshita claimed to have found were fabricated?

I will reiterate as many times as necessary. The victim was not murdered by anyone. He simply committed suicide. But the police and prosecution, driven by a desperate desire to restore their tarnished reputation, conducted a biased investigation, and as a result, everything became confused!"

I declared firmly.

Here, I paused once more, and then, quietly, as if pleading, I began my final argument.

"I will now hand you over to Prosecutor Togasaki. He will, as expected, try to lead you to a truth that is convenient for the prosecution. However, I will no longer have the opportunity to rebut him.

However, I firmly believe that the wise and discerning jurors will surely notice the numerous inconsistencies in the prosecution's arguments.

Finally, I have just one last request. Please listen carefully to the words that the prosecutor is about to say and scrutinize them closely. This is my only request to you."

Bowing deeply in a gesture of respect, I added,

"Thank you for your kind attention."

The courtroom fell into a deep silence.

This could be said to be the most blissful moment for a lawyer. If this weren't a courtroom, I'm sure even a round of applause would have erupted.

And — oh, how wonderful it would be if the trial were to end at this very moment.

But the judge turned toward the Hyena Prosecutor.

"Now, Prosecutor Togasaki, are you ready? If you need to, we can take a break here."

"That will not be necessary. I would like to proceed with my closing argument immediately."

"Very well. Please go ahead."

As expected of him. Clearly, the defense had the upper hand right now. Taking a break to calm the excitement would be one strategy, but if he took a break here, it would only give the jurors time to carefully consider my words. Togasaki seemed to understand this quite well.

The Hyena Prosecutor slowly rose from his seat and, just like I did, walked over to the jurors.

And with that thick-skinned face of his, he put on an incongruous expression that could only be described as a salesman's smile. …I could only hope that the jurors felt the same way I did about it.

"Now, everyone.

How did you find the defense's closing argument? Well, I must admit, Mr. Yamashika certainly has a talent for oration. If I were allowed, I would even like to offer a round of applause.

He has a talent for speech. Perhaps one could even say he has a talent as a director. But I would add that he also has a talent as a con artist."

He certainly came out swinging from the start.

"Everyone, I agree that his words sounded quite plausible.

But you must not be deceived. The defense attorney has simply added his own biased interpretations to the evidence and testimony that I have presented so far, pointing out minor stumbles as if he had won a great victory, and indulging in nothing more than self-satisfaction.

The witnesses who have testified so far are not perfect human beings. In fact, you jurors know that perfect human beings do not exist. Against such witnesses, the defense attorney has attempted to complicate the issues and confuse the trial by pointing out insignificant, trivial mistakes. And we must also acknowledge that, so far, this attempt seems to be somewhat successful.

However — before we get into the heart of the argument, I would like to share a new fact with you.

Earlier, the defense conducted a very interesting experiment. He claimed that the victim, who was supposed to have been murdered, was actually alive and would walk through the door at the back.

When someone says something like that, anyone would look at the door. Even I involuntarily looked back. And the defense attorney then added his own interpretation to this natural human reaction, claiming that the fact that you looked at the door was proof that you were doubting the prosecution's case.

I think you can easily see, upon reflection, how absurd this argument is. For example, if I were to ask you to look at the door right now, what would you do? Most of you would probably turn to look. In other words, what the defense attorney did was nothing more than that.

Let me add one more thing. There is one fact that you all likely overlooked when the defense conducted his bizarre experiment.

Let me tell you. I noticed it. When everyone was focusing on the door at the back, there were exactly two people who did not look at the door.

Who were those two? The defendants.

I’m sure you can see what this means. In other words, they knew. They knew that the victim wasn’t alive. In other words, they knew there was no need to turn around and look at the door."

"Objection!"

I quickly stood up.

"While it is tacitly understood that objections aren’t raised during closing arguments, if the prosecution presents evidence that is contrary to the facts, that is a different matter. The prosecution claimed that the two defendants did not look at the door, but that is a lie. I know that the defendants were also focused on the door."

"Oh, defense attorney, if I may, isn’t it you who is lying? I will say it plainly: the defendants did not look at the door. It seems that you are the one lying to cover for the defendants.

Unfortunately, the others probably didn't notice because they were caught in your malicious trap and focused on the door, but I was watching. They did not look at the door at all."

Damn... This guy never went down without a fight. He had turned the fact that everyone looked at the door against me.

At that moment, the sound of the gavel echoed, and I lost the chance to respond.

"That will be enough on this matter."

The judge said gently.

"It is impossible to verify the truth when the only witnesses are the defense attorney and the prosecutor. I will not strike either statement from the record, and we will note the defense's objection. However, further debate on this matter would be a waste of time. Prosecutor Togasaki, please continue with your closing argument."

"Understood, Your Honor."

Damn it.

"Now, everyone. The defense attorney has tried every trick in the book to discredit the witnesses.

But the defense attorney has overlooked one fact. The witnesses had no reason to lie.

The defense has repeatedly claimed that the police conducted a biased investigation out of revenge because the defendant embarrassed them in a previous criminal trial. However, this is nothing but unfounded fantasy.

Take Officer Kinoshita, for example. The defense attorney claimed that he falsified evidence found in the defendants' car because he had been demoted and transferred to a remote area after an alleged sexual harassment incident, and he wanted to gain recognition.

But does the defense attorney truly know what kind of person Officer Kinoshita is?

He repeatedly mentioned that Officer Kinoshita's rank is too low for his age. But I must ask, what is wrong with his rank being that of a patrolman?

I know several admirable police officers who have refused promotions because they simply want to continue working closely with the people. Is the defense attorney trying to insult them just because they hold the rank of patrolman? If so, I cannot help but question whether he has any proper sense of ethics as a lawyer.

Officer Kinoshita is well-respected by the local people as a diligent police officer in his current post at Abuku Town. Did the defense attorney properly investigate this? I doubt it.

Furthermore, the defense attorney mentioned that Officer Kinoshita is suspected of having been involved in a sexual harassment incident in the past. However, a suspicion is nothing more than a suspicion, and there are no actual records of such an incident. No complaints were filed, nor was he subjected to any disciplinary action.

I will concede that it is not praiseworthy for a police officer to be suspected of such behavior. That is why I objected when this topic was brought up.

However, this alone may not fully satisfy you all. So let me tell you the truth. Police officers who work at police boxes provide a sense of security to the public every day, but at the same time, they are arresting criminals on a daily basis. In other words, while they are trusted by the people, they are also resented by criminals.

There was a young woman among the associates of a criminal whom Officer Kinoshita arrested while on duty at the police box. She harbored a deep grudge against Officer Kinoshita — and I'm sure you can imagine the rest. She started making all sorts of wild accusations.

However, Officer Kinoshita was never charged with any crime. His conduct on duty was faultless, and naturally, he had done nothing to feel guilty about.

Later, tired of working in the chaotic city of Tokyo, Officer Kinoshita requested a transfer to a more peaceful location. That is why he now lives in Abuku Town.

Everyone, please remember this. In the end, a suspicion is nothing more than a suspicion."

As expected of Togasaki. Knowing full well that I had no opportunity to refute his claims, he was painting Officer Kinoshita as a saint. I'd like to ask him whether he had really done his homework. Police covering up crimes within their own ranks wasn't exactly rare.

But I had no chance to counter his argument now. If the jurors ended up believing Togasaki's claims, it could be quite problematic. If they concluded that I've unfairly accused an honest cop, it would be my own image of integrity that got tarnished. I hope they remembered the saying, "Where there's smoke, there's fire."

"Ladies and gentlemen of the jury. Like Officer Kinoshita, all police officers are dedicated to their duties. They bear no grudges, only a deep hatred for crime, and they work tirelessly, often sacrificing meals and sleep, to carry out their responsibilities. As the prosecutor overseeing this investigation, I have closely observed the diligent work of these police officers.

The defense attorney's arguments clearly insult such officers. I will admit, however, that all humans make mistakes. I regret that I have allowed the defense attorney the leeway to make such reckless claims.

Everyone makes mistakes. But it seems the defense attorney cannot tolerate even the slightest error, though of course, he seems to exclude himself from such scrutiny."

"Prosecutor Togasaki," the judge admonished, "please refrain from personal attacks."

"My apologies.

But allow me to say this. What is wrong with rearresting someone within twenty-four hours of being acquitted? If there is suspicion of murder and evidence supporting that suspicion is found, the only thing left to do is make the arrest. What's the problem with conducting a swift investigation? Is the defense suggesting that we should intentionally slow down the investigation to give the perpetrator time to hide the evidence?"

Togasaki shrugged his shoulders dramatically and gave the jurors a wry smile.

Then, he spoke again, quietly.

"Ladies and gentlemen, please recall what the defense attorney vehemently argued earlier.

He does not dispute that the cause of the victim's death was drowning.

He does not dispute that the victim and the defendants met at the seaside around 4:00 PM on December 10th.

He does not dispute that there is no definitive evidence proving the defendants' whereabouts at the hotel from 4:00 PM to 7:00 PM.

He does not dispute that one of the defendants, Koji Nioka, had been prescribed Halcion.

And further, he did not dispute the motive for murder that we have presented regarding the inheritance.

While the defense attorney claims that our case is full of holes and contradictions, he agrees with all of this evidence. So, which side is truly inconsistent?

There is only one conclusion to be drawn from the evidence we have submitted.

One of the defendants, Koji Nioka, is currently unemployed. Moreover, his past behavior cannot be said to have been exemplary.

Shoko Ichinomiya, the wife of the victim, is said to have committed suicide. The cause of her death lies with these two defendants. The victim resented this deeply and warned the defendants. He told them there would be no inheritance for them. Enraged, Koji Nioka then sought revenge and plotted to kill him.

The steps were as follows: First, the victim was given beer laced with Halcion, rendering him unconscious, and then he was drowned in the sea. To avoid suspicion falling on them, they moved the body far away, to Abuku Lake.

However, their scheme was foiled by two pieces of physical evidence discovered through the police's diligent investigation: plankton and small stones.

The defense attorney repeatedly argued that just because plankton found in the victim's organs only exist in the sea, it doesn't conclusively prove that the victim drowned in the sea. Dr. Honjo also acknowledged this point.

It may indeed be insufficient. However, it is also true that it cannot be denied.

When a person drowns, plankton accumulate in the organs. This is a fact. And the plankton found in this case were all marine species. This is also a fact. The defense attorney is only interpreting things in a way that suits him, but you must not ignore these facts.

There is only one conclusion to be drawn from this evidence: the defendants killed the victim.

The defense attorney stated that it is impossible for someone who has just been cleared of murder charges to commit another murder on the same day.

Anyone would think that. No one would commit another murder under such circumstances.

But what if we consider the opposite? Isn't it entirely plausible that the assumption that Koji Nioka would never commit another murder was, in fact, his cover?

I will repeat once more. The defendants killed the victim.

The defense attorney repeatedly stated that in a criminal trial, the burden of proof lies with the prosecution, and that the crime must be proven beyond a reasonable doubt. This is an uncharacteristically accurate statement from him.

However, this is not a trial; it is a preliminary hearing. And as the defense attorney himself has pointed out, in a preliminary hearing, it is sufficient to present evidence that gives rise to reasonable suspicion that the defendants committed the crime. That is why we, the prosecution, generally do not reveal all our cards during a preliminary hearing.

But when dealing with Attorney Yamashika, exceptions must be made. In previous preliminary hearings, he has confused numerous trials by arguing that our failure to reveal all our cards was a flaw, using cunning and underhanded tactics. That is why I have come from Tokyo this time, to ensure perfection.

Even so, this remains a preliminary hearing. No matter how ignorant or nonsensical the defense attorney's arguments may be, if you have any doubt that the defendants committed the crime, do not hesitate. Please help move this case swiftly to trial. You have the power to do so.

The defense attorney also argued that we, the prosecution, have only presented circumstantial evidence and not a single piece of direct evidence.

I do not deny that most of the evidence we have presented is circumstantial. However, if we were to accept the defense's argument as is, we would no longer be able to convict anyone once direct evidence is eliminated. Circumstantial evidence cannot be ignored, nor can its evidentiary value be denied. The key is to deduce the truth from such evidence."

Here, Togasaki paused to take a breath.

"Now, ladies and gentlemen.

The defense attorney said that the defendants were arrested, had their photos plastered across the media, and have been treated poorly. He pleaded for them to be released from such suffering.

I do not wish to impose punishment on innocent people either. But we must not be mistaken. Those who commit crimes must be punished. This is a nation governed by the rule of law, and it is our responsibility.

We must not mistake the meaning of the word 'mercy.' Mercy is not something that should be extended to criminals; it is something that should be given to the victims.

Ladies and gentlemen. The victim in this case is not the defendants, but Akiyuki Ichinomiya, who was killed. What kind of person he was, and what he might have been to those who knew him, are things that we, who never met him and never will, can never fully understand."

However, there are also facts that have been established. He worked diligently as a company employee until his retirement. After devoting many years of service to society, he had the right to enjoy a peaceful retirement. No one had the right to take that away from him. But if there is a criminal who did take that away, we must punish that person.

Judging others is not an easy task. But when it is necessary, we must not hesitate. It is a necessary action and a righteous one."

After finishing, Togasaki fell silent and made eye contact with each of the five jurors, one by one.

… Damn. I didn’t do that performance.

"Ladies and gentlemen, the evidence to move this case to trial has been gathered. Please make the right judgment."

Togasaki quietly concluded his argument.

He was a seasoned professional, no doubt about it. Given that I put a lot of effort into my closing argument, it was likely that Togasaki also put in significant effort. And judging by the jurors' reactions, they were just as engrossed as they were when I finished my argument. To be honest, at this point, I had no idea what conclusion the jurors would come to.

But there was one thing that the Hyena Prosecutor hadn’t noticed.

My goal wasn’t to win an acquittal here and now.

Of course, an acquittal at this stage would be ideal, but from the way Togasaki delivered his argument, it didn’t seem likely that the jurors would reach a conclusion easily.

But that was precisely my objective.

"Now then—", the judge began. "I will move to a separate room with the jurors to deliberate on this case.

We will take a break until 2 PM."

The gavel struck with a sharp crack.

Immediately, the room was filled with murmurs as people rose from their seats, discussing the proceedings among themselves.

◆

In situations like this, time passed surprisingly quickly.

The minute hand of the clock repeated its rotations, and before long, the courtroom was once again filled with people.

However, there was one exception — a place where no one was sitting: the jury box.

Eventually, when the hour hand pointed exactly at 2 PM, the judge returned.

"Well, everyone is here?

Ordinarily, I would inform you of the results of the deliberations right away, but…

I must inform you that the jurors have not yet reached a verdict, as some members are still undecided about whether to dismiss the case. We ask that you wait a little longer."

Here it came.

"Your Honor," I interjected. "Does that mean there's a strong opinion that the victim committed suicide?"

"…Counsel Yamashika. What exactly are you implying with that question?" The judge responded in an unusually stern tone. "Do you think I would disclose such information while the jury's verdict is still pending?"

"No, I apologize. Please, don't mind me."

"…Very well.

We will take another short recess."

The gavel struck again.

Shortly afterward, I received an email from Kageno.

The content was a single line: 'Target is on the move'. That was all.

Just as planned. I quickly sprang into action, leaving the defense table and heading toward the other side.

"Hey, Togasaki. There's something important about the case that I need to discuss with you. Can I have a moment?"

Naturally, Togasaki looked at me with extreme suspicion.

"Well, this is unexpected. I didn't think you'd call me over for something like this. You're not about to suggest a plea bargain at this late stage, are you?"

"As if. Anyway, it's something important for this case. I could just take the judge away without you, but I figured you wouldn't like that."

"…"

Togasaki glared at me sullenly, but without further argument, he stood up.

Next, I approached the judge, who was about to leave the courtroom.

"Your Honor, there's something critical about the case that I must inform you of. I'd like you to come with me now."

"Well… I'm supposed to return to the jurors shortly."

"Of course, I understand. However, this is an extremely important matter related to the case."

"…Hmm. How long will it take?"

"Probably about two hours."

The judge pondered for a moment, then asked,

"You said it was important?"

"Yes."

"If I determine that it's not important, are you prepared to face charges of contempt of court?"

"That would be a fair consequence."

I answered firmly, without hesitation. Perhaps realizing the seriousness of the situation, the judge eventually nodded.

"…Very well. I'll have another judge oversee the jury's deliberations."

"Thank you for your cooperation."

◆

I put the two of them in a car and, relying on further updates from Kageno's email, headed to a certain location.

"Where exactly are we going?"

Togasaki, sitting in the back seat, asked. Incidentally, the judge was also in the back seat. The fact that both of them had their seatbelts securely fastened — was that meant to be some kind of ironic jab at me?

"You'll find out when we get there, prosecutor.

Don’t worry, I’m not planning to manipulate the situation or cover up the case."

"It doesn’t sound like a joke when you say it."

The judge commented. Whatever.

December 16th, 3:00 PM, Abuku Lake

I stopped the car on the west side of Abuku Lake.

"I smell sulfur," Togasaki said. "Isn’t this near where those small stones were found?"

"Exactly. Sorry, but we’ll have to walk from here. If we’re spotted in the car, it’ll all be for nothing."

I forcefully led the two skeptical men off the paved road and toward the lakeshore of Abuku Lake, where yellowish stones of various sizes were scattered.

And then — I spotted a figure hiding behind a rock, and two more figures crouching further ahead.

"You’re here. You got here pretty fast."

The figure hiding behind the rock — Kageno — noticed me and spoke. His appearance was somewhat unusual. He wore headphones over his ears, held an IC recorder in his left hand, and in his right hand, he had a conical object resembling a parabolic antenna, aimed at the two crouching figures ahead.

"Do you have the evidence?"

In response to my question, Kageno nodded while raising the IC recorder.

"Yeah, we’ve got it."

The preparations were complete. There was no need to hesitate anymore. I walked toward the two people, making deliberate crunching sounds with my footsteps.

Apparently hearing the footsteps, the two crouching figures turned to face me.

"What!? W-Why are you here…?"

An old man with a wicked face said that.

Ignoring him, I turned to the prosecutor and judge standing behind me.

"Well then, everyone, allow me to introduce you once more. The real culprits who murdered Akiyuki Ichinomiya — his own younger brother, Tomoyasu Ichinomiya, and Dr. Shozo Kasai."

"...Huh?"

The judge's face stiffened.

"W-What nonsense are you spouting?" Togasaki was the first to speak. "These two are the real culprits!? Where did you get such nonsense!?"

"Thank you for that textbook question, Prosecutor Togasaki.

Let me explain. I'm sure you all have plenty to say, but please listen to me first.

Now, everyone, recall the case. Akiyuki Ichinomiya, who was murdered, first summoned the Nioka couple and hinted at his intention to commit suicide. At that point, I realized something. Why did he talk to the Nioka couple?

No, it's not a difficult question. They are his stepdaughter and son-in-law. If Akiyuki Ichinomiya intended to meet someone before committing suicide, it would be perfectly natural.

But remember, Akiyuki Ichinomiya still had one blood relative. His younger brother, Tomoyasu Ichinomiya. It wouldn't be strange at all if, after his final conversation with his children-in-law, he then met with his brother.

The two of them met. The location was likely near this Abuku Lake. However, I firmly believe that it was Tomoyasu who called Akiyuki out. Because at that time, he had a certain scheme in mind.

If Akiyuki Ichinomiya were to die now, his inheritance would go to Mayu Nioka.

But remember the civil code. What would happen if it were determined that Akiyuki Ichinomiya was killed by the Nioka couple? If an heir harms the person they are to inherit from, they are stripped of their inheritance rights. And if Mayu Nioka loses her inheritance rights, a certain person who previously had no claim to the inheritance would suddenly gain those rights."

"…That's true, but surely not…"

Togasaki groaned.

"That's right. That person is none other than Akiyuki's only blood relative, Tomoyasu.

Here, on the lakeside, Tomoyasu met with Akiyuki, who was already intoxicated, and gave him Halcion, causing him to fall unconscious, and then drowned him."

"W-Wait a minute, defense counsel," Togasaki interrupted. "Are you saying that he also had Halcion on him? There was no record of that anywhere."

"Yes, Prosecutor Togasaki, if you say so, then it must be true.

However, I'm not claiming that the perpetrator acted alone."

I turned to face Tomoyasu.

"Tomoyasu, I hate to say this, but I don't believe you could have come up with such a method of killing on your own. I looked into your background. You have no formal education and have spent decades living off others. I don't believe you have the legal knowledge required for such a plan. I also don't think you could have come up with the idea of using Halcion to make the victim unconscious and then drowning him. In fact, I don't even think you could have obtained Halcion in the first place.

In other words, you had a collaborator. Or perhaps you were coaxed into it by someone.

Now, there's another person here who recently lost their job due to the death of Akiyuki's wife, Shoko, and is in desperate need of money. Someone who would kill if it meant getting money. Moreover, this person has sufficient knowledge of drugs and has had legal troubles in the past due to a medical malpractice incident.

By now, you must know who I'm talking about — Shozo Kasai, it's you!"

I compared the faces of the two true perpetrators. Both were completely frozen.

"W-Wait a minute!" the judge said. "What you're saying does seem to make sense. But these two haven't done anything to frame the defendants — Mr. and Mrs. Nioka. If, as you say, they were plotting to have the Nioka couple accused of murdering the victim in order to steal the inheritance, they should have taken some action to falsely implicate them. However, these two have had almost no involvement in the preliminary hearing."

"As expected, Your Honor, you're absolutely right.

Certainly, these two must have thought that far ahead. It's simple. All they had to do was claim that they saw the Nioka couple disposing of the body in the lake, or that they spotted the couple near the lake, and report it to the police.

But a stroke of luck occurred for these two. Don't you see? The swift action of the police.

The very next morning after the incident was revealed, the intended suspects were arrested. Without any effort from these two, the Nioka couple were arrested under suspicion of killing their father-in-law. If they had said anything unnecessary and ended up being suspected themselves, it would have been disastrous. They were able to avoid that risk. They must have been overjoyed."

I grinned as I looked at the two of them.

"I suspected that the two of you were the real culprits. You conspired to lure Akiyuki here, administered Halcion and alcohol to him, and then threw him into the lake to drown him. However, as it stands, I didn't have a single piece of evidence to prove it.

So, I devised a certain plan.

Akiyuki Ichinomiya had a considerable amount of inheritance. Additionally, both Akiyuki and his wife were insured under life insurance policies. But even with that insurance money, the two of you here needed more money.

So I made a certain claim in court. That the cause of the victim's death was not murder, but suicide.

If by any chance this claim were accepted, it would be a disaster for the two of you. Not only would the inheritance go to the Nioka couple, but also, although the Ichinomiya couple were indeed insured under life insurance, just ten months ago, they renewed their policies under a different plan for the elderly.

Are you familiar with the well-known clause in life insurance policies? Yes, if the insured commits suicide within a year of the policy's start date, the insurance payout is not granted.

In other words, the life insurance payout for Shoko Ichinomiya, who recently committed suicide, would not be granted. Moreover, if Akiyuki were also determined to have committed suicide, it would be nothing short of a nightmare for the two of you.

However, in the trial, both I and Prosecutor Togasaki delivered closing arguments without giving an inch, leaving the cause of death — suicide or homicide — hanging in the balance.

I was waiting for this situation. What would the two of you do when cornered? Fortunately, no suspicion has yet fallen on you. So, there's only one thing to do. You would fabricate evidence this time.

At this point, if you were to make a sudden and obvious statement, it would only make you appear more suspicious. However, for example, the only evidence currently linking the defendants to this scene is those small stones. But I have loudly claimed that the stones might have been planted by Officer Kinoshita.

In such a situation, what would happen if new evidence belonging to the defendants were to suddenly emerge from this scene? Now then—”

I turned my gaze to the two frozen men.

“You both seemed to be burying something earlier. What exactly were you burying?”

I forcefully pushed the two of them aside.

There, buried among the stones, was an unusually clean handkerchief.

“This most likely belongs to one of the two defendants. In other words, that’s what this is about.”

“W-Wait a minute!”

Until now, Dr. Kasai had been silently listening to my story, overwhelmed, but now he finally began to shout.

“That forensic expert, Honjo, said it himself! He said the victim was thrown into the water no earlier than 5:30 PM! We have a solid alibi for that time!”

At this, Tomoyasu also suddenly regained his energy,

“T-That’s right! We have an alibi!”

He parroted, without an ounce of originality.

“In the first place—” Dr. Kasai continued. “That handkerchief was there from the beginning! We did come here hoping to find some evidence to aid the investigation, but we didn’t fabricate anything! This is new evidence we just found!”

I shrugged and smiled.

“That’s exactly what I expected you to say.

So, let me first explain how you fabricated your alibi.

You see, it gets very cold around here at night. Although Abuku Lake is a non-freezing lake due to the hot springs, it doesn’t mean the entire lake remains unfrozen; thick ice forms on the northern side of the lake.

You two used that ice. You placed the victim on the ice and let it drift into the lake. The ice eventually melted due to the temperature difference, causing Akiyuki to drown. At this time of

year, it's pitch dark by 5 PM around here, so there wouldn't have been any tourists to witness it. That's how you created a time gap. And there's evidence to support this."

I took a photograph from the inside pocket of my coat and dropped it on the ground.

It was one of the photos I had shown to Ujigami. The photo showed the underside of the victim's hands.

"Take a good look at that photo. There are blisters on the underside of the hands, similar to those caused by burns.

But these aren't burns. They're frostbite. The victim was placed on the ice while unconscious. During that time, his hands were in prolonged contact with the ice and developed frostbite. Just like in this photo."

"Ugh…"

The two real culprits had fallen completely silent, unable to utter a word, but that didn't last long. Soon enough, Dr. Kasai flared up.

"Shut up, shut up, shut up! What nonsense have you been spouting? Did someone claim to have seen us dumping the victim in the lake or something!? There's no evidence anywhere that we did such a thing! What's this about ice, and what do those photos prove?

Surely you don't actually think you can accuse us of being the culprits based on such delusional claims!?"

They said that thieves were often brazen, and it was certainly true.

"Yes, of course, this isn't all I have. That's precisely why I heated up the trial, waiting for you to dig your own grave like this.

As for that handkerchief — of course, I knew you'd claim it had been there from the start. So I made sure to be prepared. Kageno, if you would?"

At my signal, Kageno nodded and pressed the play button on the IC recorder.

A voice began to play from the recorder.

'But can we really get them convicted with this?'

It was Tomoyasu Ichinomiya's voice.

‘Of course we can,’ followed by Kasai’s voice. ‘Didn’t the judge say it? The jury still hasn’t reached a verdict. That means the jury also suspects something. If we can just give them one final push, we can definitely get them convicted.

More importantly, you brought the item, right?’

‘Yeah, here it is. I swiped it from their laundry. But are you sure about this? If someone sees us doing this, we won’t have any way to explain it.’

‘Calm down. Even if someone sees us burying the handkerchief, so what? There’s no one who saw us kill your brother, so no matter what happens, no one will suspect us.’

“Kageno, that’s enough.

Now, do you understand, gentlemen? I had Kageno follow you and record your conversations with a sound recorder.”

That was enough. The two of them slumped their shoulders in defeat.

Even Togasaki slumped his shoulders in defeat.

December 16th, 11:00 PM, Yamashika Law Office

Returning to the empty law office, I looked at the clock and felt a wave of exhaustion. 11:00 PM. Well, I should be glad I made it back today.

Even after my solo performance at the lake, the case didn’t resolve quickly.

First, Togasaki arrested Tomoyasu Ichinomiya and Shozo Kasai, not for murder, but for fabricating evidence, caught them in the act, and handed them over to the police.

Then we returned to the courthouse. It would have been over quickly if Togasaki had just withdrawn the charges then and there, but that Hyena Prosecutor still couldn’t fully believe that those two were the real culprits. In the end, he only requested an extension of the trial, claiming that important evidence related to the case had been discovered.

There was nothing I could do, so I returned to the inn. But just as I arrived, I was summoned back to the court again. Whether it was due to Togasaki’s harsh interrogation or a plea bargain, Tomoyasu Ichinomiya had quickly confessed to the crime, and the case was resolved.

As a result, Togasaki finally withdrew the charges, and I had to drive all the way back to the courthouse to deal with the aftermath.

The Nioka couple was released, and I finally finished everything related to this case. After driving for hours again, I finally made it back to the office.

The final arguments had drained my energy, and on top of that, the long hours of driving had worn me out. Watching Togasaki on TV, twisting his defeat statement into just dropping the charges, made me laugh, but even so, I was mentally exhausted.

Looking back, it was the allure of a hot spring trip — especially the words “hot spring” — that led me to that place, and I got caught up in such a troublesome case. They say nothing good comes from giving in to greed, so I thought I’d refrain from acting on desires for a while…

At that moment, the office phone rang.

I didn’t want to deal with any work matters today. I briefly considered letting the answering machine take it, but since it was this late, it might be Yukina. I couldn’t rule out that possibility, so I hastily picked up the phone.

“Hello, Yamashika Law Office.”

‘Zenko? It’s me.’

I silently hung up the receiver.

Good grief, why was today so full of exhausting things — before I could even wallow in my misery, the phone rang again.

I thought about ignoring it, but as expected (or rather, predictably), the ringing didn’t show any signs of stopping, no matter how long I left it.

This was only going to stress me out more. Reluctantly, I picked up the receiver.

‘Don’t hang up on me like that, you idiot! I’m bringing you some good news!’

Ugh, so tiring…

“Alright, alright. I’ll listen to what you have to say, so get on with it.”

‘Hmph, I don’t see a shred of gratitude in you. Oh well. I saw on the news that the trial’s wrapped up, right? So, Yukina’s thinking you must be tired, and she’s planning another hot spring trip.’

“And?”

Yukina’s thoughtfulness was greatly appreciated.

But right now, I wasn't interested in hot springs at all. I responded half-heartedly.

‘And, well, there’s no way she’s going to let a beast like you take her on a trip alone, so I found a nice inn for us to stay at. It’s a lodge owned by my dad’s company, so we can stay there cheaply. Oh, and since it’s cheap, you’re paying, of course.’

“You’ve got to be kidding. Unfortunately, I’m not interested in going to a hot spring anytime soon. I’d much rather spend the day lounging around the office; that would be a much better way to unwind.”

‘Oh really? That’s what you’re going to say? What a waste, especially since I’ve got some good information for you.’

“…What kind?”

Perhaps it was the sad nature of being a lawyer, but I found myself asking despite myself.

At that moment — I somehow felt that Satsuki was smirking on the other end of the line.

‘I heard there’s a mixed-gender hot spring there.’

So that’s what it was.

“Hah, who cares about mixed baths? I’m done with hot springs for a while, I’m not going.”

Yeah. Nothing good came from acting on your desires. Especially when it came to hot springs, nothing but trouble would happen if I went.

I wasn't going to any hot spring. Mixed baths be damned.

“…But, well, if Yukina insists—”

Afterword

When I look back on all the afterwords I've written so far, I realize that almost every first line ends with "How did you like this story?" Unfortunately, as I begin to write this afterword, I can't seem to find any more appropriate words to start with, so once again, I'm going to begin with the same pattern.

How did you like the sixth volume of "Tactical Judgment"?

This time, it ended up being the second part of a two-part series, but since it's been about three months since the release of the first part, I hope you were able to read it smoothly without any confusion.

Suddenly changing the topic, this happened in February of this year.

Around that time, I had the urge to write a story set in a hot spring resort. But, embarrassingly enough, while I do enjoy traveling, the only accommodations I had stayed at until then were cheap places like youth hostels, overnight trains, or inns that charged around 25 dollars per night. Besides a school trip and a family vacation over a decade ago, I had never stayed at a traditional inn.

So, despite having another deadline looming, I went on an overnight trip in February. It was to an inn near a certain lake in the Tohoku region.

And there, I realized the emptiness of staying at an inn with just another guy.

Yes. The author, who doesn’t even have a girlfriend, went on an overnight trip with a male friend.

Inns these days are quite something. The service, of course, but also — unlike youth hostels, where the floors creak loudly with every step — in consideration of the clientele, the soundproofing in the rooms was excellent.

Once the door was closed, you couldn’t hear a single sound from outside the room. Conversely, no sound from inside could be heard outside — no matter what you did, even if, say, you were having a pillow fight.

…If I write any more, I might give readers the wrong idea about my character, so I’ll stop here. But in conclusion, there’s nothing that beats firsthand experience for generating story ideas.

(Suddenly, but here’s a bit of a spoiler from here on out.)

So, as I was saying… not that this has much connection to the story, I conducted some silly experiments while writing this book.

For instance, what happens if human skin is exposed to ice for a long period?

I gave it a try.

It's not like I had no experience with it. I could imagine it would be something like frostbite or a burn.

Well, I figured if getting a burn on my finger could serve as material for writing, I might as well try pressing ice from the freezer hard against my finger and leaving it there. Looking back, it was nothing short of foolish.

I'm sure readers can imagine what happened. The ice stuck to my finger. Firmly.

Owwww, it's cold, it hurts. Still, I reminded myself that I had to endure it to see what would happen to the skin, but, well, humanities majors like me are notoriously weak-willed.

I couldn't bear the pain, so I hurriedly tried to remove it, but the ice was stuck fast and wouldn't come off. At that point, I started to panic, wondering if I'd go beyond a burn and end up with frostbite, leading me to lose my finger. In a panic, I soaked it in lukewarm water, and somehow, I managed to remove it.

Readers, if you leave your hand on ice for too long, it'll stick and be dangerous. Please don't try this at home.

However, this didn't help me with my writing at all. So, I ended up researching frostbite on the internet. That's when I discovered something new.

Apparently, ice made in a freezer is particularly cold, reaching temperatures as low as minus twenty degrees Celsius.

However, ice you might see outside — like on puddles on a cold day — is only slightly below freezing.

In other words, unless you're in an extremely cold place with temperatures around minus twenty degrees, even though it's all still ice, there's a difference in temperature between naturally formed ice and ice made in a freezer.

That's why when using household ice to cool your skin after sports, it's standard practice to run it under tap water first, or mix it with water.

In short, pressing my finger against ice from the freezer was a completely useless experiment for writing this book. What on earth was I doing? And what's the point of including this in the afterword? It seems I have a bad habit of using my daily mishaps as material for afterwords.

Furthermore, in writing this book, I received guidance on life insurance from my former classmate Mr. K, who works at an insurance company, and on the drugs mentioned in the story, I consulted with my own mother, who for some reason holds a pharmacist's license. I'd like to take this opportunity to thank them. You never know when and where connections in life will come in handy.

By the way, I'm currently looking for someone who knows what happens when you shoot a chunk of meat with a shotgun. If any readers have any clues, I'd be very grateful if you could let me know…

Now, here's a little announcement regarding the Tactical series.

It's hard to believe that this series has already reached its seventh book, including the short story collections. I've tried my best to avoid falling into a rut, given the nature of the subject matter, but as expected, I'm starting to run out of ideas for criminal trials.

So, it's with great reluctance and suddenness that I must announce that with this book, the first part of the Tactical series will come to an end. Thank you for all your support so far. I look forward to the day when I can meet you all again.

Farewell.

…If I said that, I'd be doing the readers a great disservice.

Fortunately, it seems I'll be able to continue writing this series for a little while longer, so I hope you'll stay with me for just a bit longer.

That being said, it's true that I'm running out of ideas for criminal trials, and I struggled quite a bit with writing courtroom scenes as early as the fifth volume.

However, fortunately, there's another major field of law besides criminal trials.

Therefore, and again with great suddenness, I'm planning to start the "Tactical Judgment Civil Litigation Arc" next. Please look forward to it.

…Yes, this time it's for real.

That said, it's just a "plan," so while the editorial department has given me the go-ahead, nothing has been set in stone regarding the schedule.

Even in civil litigation, there are cases involving murder, and I have a rough idea of the story in my head, but with the current system where characters seem to age ten years with each completed trial, there are bound to be some issues. I'll need to come up with a new setting — or rather, make one up — but this is proving to be a hassle, and there's even a possibility that the next work, while still being about a lawyer, might not bear the title "Tactical Judgment."

Alternatively, though I've repeatedly mentioned that I'm running out of ideas for criminal trials, it's not that I've completely run out of material, so there's a chance that the next book might just ignore everything I've written in this afterword and return to criminal trials as if nothing happened. Or, there's the third volume of the "Frontier of Junk" series, or I might completely change direction and start something like "Kageno's Detective Diary."

…Having written all this, it feels somewhat presumptuous to say this now, but in short, nothing has really been decided yet…

Even so, I would be most grateful if you would continue to accompany me in the next installment.

I sincerely hope to see you again next year.

December 2004, Toru Shiwasu

P.S.:

I've created a website. There's not much content yet, but if you're interested, please feel free to visit.

http://t-december.hp.infoseek.co.jp/

師走トオル

しわすとおる●埼玉県在住。「タクティカル・ジャッジメント」で第2回富士見ヤングミステリー大賞準入選に選ばれる。同作にて作家デビュー。その後、新シリーズ『がらくたのフロンティア』を発表。ゲームと名のつくものなら、なんでも大好き。最近は、オヤジギャグ増加の傾向にあるようだが、本人に自覚はない……ようだ。

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